# The Roles We're Forced to Play

DonkeyBrained

Yellowjackets (TV) Complete

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# Summary

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## Description:

Jackie tells Shauna she’s pregnant, and Shauna decides she will lie, cheat, and manipulate anyone necessary to get Jackie out of the wilderness—even if that means pretending she has powers to gain worshippers to help her.

# 1. Pregnancy

Shauna noticed the tension increasing by the day as her fellow Yellowjackets looked at Jackie with a steadily growing amount of venom.

She almost wanted to hang her out to dry, but she had always been a giant pushover for Jackie Taylor.

Shauna was also worried about her. Jackie had been sneaking out the last few mornings, and after following her, Shauna found her hunched over, throwing up a little ways off from the cabin.

It'd been hard for Shauna not to run over, hold her hair back, and immediately ask what was wrong. But she'd been annoyed Jackie didn't tell her what was going on, so she walked away instead, telling herself she didn't want to fight with Jackie so early in the morning.

That was two days ago. This morning, Shauna noticed how incredibly done with Jackie's laziness most of her teammates were as she slept in again.

That was why when Jackie finally came outside—hours after everyone else had already been up and working—Shauna made her way over to where she stood near the cabin steps. She made sure all her genuine worry came to her face and raised her voice more than necessary. "Jackie, are you okay? You've been throwing up the last few days."

Jackie's eyes grew wide, and she jolted back. "I—uh. Shauna." Her friend's gaze flicked from person to person, and their expressions were what Shauna hoped. Their contempt had simmered down and become overtaken with concern for Jackie.

Her hand snatched Shauna's wrist and pulled her away from the group. "What the fuck, Shauna?! Why would you say that in front of everyone?" she hissed at her.

Jackie stomped a few steps into the nearby tree line and spun back to face Shauna. Her arms crossed, and Jackie did that thing where her eyes grew big, and her mouth pouted into a cute little frown and—

Shauna blinked and glanced away, getting her thoughts back in order.

She looked back again and sighed. She knew Jackie wouldn't get this, but Shauna felt compelled to try. "I did you a favor."

Jackie's face scrunched up, and she looked at her like Shauna was the one who could only get into Rutgers and not an Ivy League like Brown. "You did me a favor by telling everyone I've been vomiting? How the fuck does that help me, Shauna?!"

"Well—" a branch snapped nearby, and Van looked at them curiously as she walked past towards the lake with a bucket.

Shauna gave her an uncomfortable smile and gripped Jackie's hand to pull her further away from the cabin.

They walked a few minutes in silence, with Jackie allowing their hands to stay linked as Shauna pulled her along.

“Ugh, seriously? How far are we going?” Jackie said with a whine.

Shauna rolled her eyes and resisted snapping at her. She needed to get this through Jackie’s thick skull.

She might have also wanted to ask Jackie if she was feeling okay and if she could do anything to make her feel better, like cuddling Jackie and rubbing her stomach.

Shauna stopped pulling and turned to her. “Everyone is getting pissed at you for not pitching in, Jackie.”

“Still not understanding how telling everyone I’ve been getting a little nauseous helps me,” Jackie said with a scowl as she played with the dirt under her shoe.

“Well, now they feel bad for you. So, they’ll give you a break.” Shauna shrugged and looked down to figure out what pattern Jackie was making.

The shoe stopped shuffling, and Shauna glanced back up. Jackie looked at her with wide eyes. “You wanted everyone to pity me?!”

Shauna groaned. “I just wanted them to lay off you a little, and that seemed like a good way to do it.”

Jackie’s face softened, a small smile coming to her lips. “So you were protecting me?”

Shauna glanced around in thought. She wasn’t sure if she’d go that far, but it made Jackie happy, so… “Yeah, okay. I guess so.”

“Thanks, Shipman.” Jackie studied her face as Shauna licked her lips and shuffled back and forth, getting nervous. Jackie’s eyes became darker, and Shauna realized she never told her the rest of her idea.

“Listen, I got you a couple of days, but you still need to help.” Her intense stare dropped from Shauna, and she looked down at the ground with a petulant frown. “I was thinking maybe I could try to show you how to cut up the deer later—”

Jackie’s face gained a green tinge at the mention of cutting up an animal. Her hand whipped up to her mouth, and her eyes looked glossy as she stared at Shauna.

“Are you okay?” Shauna’s arm went toward her, and she took a step with a pinched brow. A flare of panic shot through her body.

Jackie spun around and vomited on the tree behind her. Shauna’s eyes widened, and she stepped forward with a curse, holding Jackie’s hair away from her face and softly stroking her back like she’d wanted to do two mornings ago.

The body underneath her hand vibrated with a groan, and Shauna moved away as Jackie spat and stood up, looking dazed.

Shauna’s palm went to Jackie’s forehead. “Are you sick? What’s wrong?”

She didn't seem especially warm. Jackie blinked a few times, looking like she was a million miles away. Shauna reached up with her sleeve and cleaned off Jackie's face, not caring if it got dirty.

Jackie came back to herself and pushed Shauna's arm away. "Ugh, Shipman. That's gross."

Shauna rolled her eyes. "You're welcome."

Jackie groaned in reply and leaned over so her hands were on her knees, and Shauna moved forward to put her hand on her again. "Are you going to throw up again?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

Shauna's hand started running up and down, and the pleased little sigh Jackie released was impossible not to find cute.

"You're scaring me. Can you tell me what's going on?"

Jackie stood up and moved to lean on a tree nearby that didn't have vomit all over it.

She stared at Shauna with glassy eyes and swallowed. "I'm late."

"For what?" Shauna could typically follow Jackie's ramblings, but this one was lost on her. It's not like they kept a schedule out there.

Jackie groaned and looked at the sky as if it could help her. Some of Shauna's patience chipped away, but one more glance at a sweaty face and large hazel eyes on the brink of tears reminded her that this was important.

"My period, Shipman." Her head came down, and she looked at a gaping Shauna. 'You got yours, right?' She just resisted nodding like an idiot. "And there's a whole gross ass pot full of soiled rags showing everyone else did, too."

"You're a virgin!" she stepped closer to Jackie. Shauna was shaking and couldn't breathe. Her hands clenched into fists so tight, and she was unsure how the bones weren't popping out of her skin from the pressure.

Jackie better tell her it was an immaculate fucking conception, or Shauna was liable to lose it.

"I… was a virgin." Jackie's eyes lowered, and her face filled with shame. "The night before we left on the plane, after dropping you off after the party. Me and Jeff we…"

Shauna whipped around, not able to look at her anymore. She stared into the distance with narrowed eyes. Her nails dug into her skin, tearing into her flesh, similar to what Jackie's words did to her heart.

A leaf crunched behind her, and then a trembling hand grabbed her shaking arm. "Shauna? Can you say something, please? You're freaking me out."

"Just… give me a second."

She needed to calm down before she started walking east towards New Jersey—like Shauna could somehow get home that way and beat Jeff to death like she imagined. Jackie

was…

Fuck! Shauna had to relax. She cannot freak out at the pregnant girl right now.

Another hand joined the first, and a thumb rubbed on her skin, leaving the warm tingles in its wake that Shauna only associated with Jackie. Her body relaxed but then stiffened again as she remembered she was still upset.

Jackie sniffled, and Shauna whipped around, forgetting all about stupid boys and how they always tried to come between them. She grabbed her, pulled her in, and let her cry on her shoulder. Her hand stroked Jackie's shaking back.

Now, Shauna would have to do everything for Jackie. She'd have to protect her from everyone and everything. Shauna almost groaned aloud as she realized she'd need to make sure Jackie got enough food and water.

Her face twisted into a scowl just thinking about all the things she'd now become responsible for. She knew Jackie would expect her to do everything—as usual.

She thought for a second of someone else doing it instead, like Natalie or Mari…

Shauna's arms crushed Jackie tighter to her chest, and she ignored the startled squeak. No, that's a terrible idea. They wouldn't do it right. And Jackie would get upset if Shauna wasn't there.

She took a breath.

She didn't let any of her internal struggle show as she whispered, "I got you. I won't let you do this alone, Jackie. It'll be okay."

Jackie practically went boneless in her arms as her sobs increased in volume.

Shauna and Jackie walked back to the cabin together in silence. She paused when they got into the clearing. Her eyes scanned the faces around, trying to see if anyone gave Jackie a dirty look so Shauna could figure out how to fix it.

Her friend stopped a few steps ahead and looked back at her with a furrowed brow. "You okay?"

Shauna blinked and gave her a slow nod as she concluded no one gave them a second glance. She looked around and tried to figure out a job that Jackie could do that wouldn't be too physical.

Everyone else had found a place for themselves and made themselves worthwhile without thought. It was only Jackie who needed to be told what to do.

Jackie grazed her arm with her fingers and looked at her worriedly. "Shauna? You're just standing there staring at everyone. I think you're scaring people."

Shauna did a slight head shake and looked around to realize Jackie was right. She was getting wary looks from all directions.

She needed to stop standing around doing nothing and find someone to help her figure out more jobs. Shauna sighed. "Right, sorry. I think I'm gonna find Tai."

Shauna stepped forward, and a hand jerked her back. Jackie looked at her with pursed lips and narrowed eyes. “Do not tell anyone about this, Shauna. I’m serious.”

“I wasn’t planning on doing it this very second, but I think they’ll notice once there’s a baby suddenly out here!” she hissed.

“Obviously, they’ll know eventually, but maybe they can just…” Jackie’s eyes looked around in thought. “Assume, but never know for sure until the birth.”

Shauna gaped at her.

Jackie groaned and crossed her arms. “Fine, I’ll tell them later, but not yet.”

Shauna turned away, running her fingers through her hair in agitation. What the hell were they gonna do? She and Jackie were not ready to raise a baby together.

The dead deer came into her sight, and a shiver went down her spine as she thought about the one thing she’d been trying to avoid. They had no doctor, no medical equipment, and nothing clean. Jackie might not even survive.

Shauna paused in her step. That’s not fucking happening.

Maybe they could figure out a way to get rid of it first. It was morbid, but if it was between Jackie and a fetus, well…

She’d keep it in mind.

“Hey, Tai. You got a second?” Shauna said, walking up to the stump for wood chopping.

She dropped the axe and wiped the sweat away from her brow. “Sure, what’s up?”

“I need someone to brainstorm with or bounce ideas off of, I guess,” Shauna said, looking down at her shuffling feet.

“Okay,” Tai drew the word out and looked at her with a raised brow. “That’s pretty vague, Shauna.”

Shauna sighed and nodded. “It’s about Jackie. I know you guys aren’t, uh,” Tai’s other brow raised, and Shauna decided to get to the point. “We can both see people are getting mad at her and so I was hoping you could help me figure out a job for her since all the lighter ones around here are pretty much full.”

Tai sighed and looked at Shauna with pity. “I get that you guys are best friends, but you don’t have to always do everything for her, Shauna. Maybe she should get a few consequences for once.” Tai shook her head.

Unfortunately, many of Shauna’s thoughts mirrored what Tai said, so arguing against this would be hard. She knew she needed to try, though, for Jackie and her stupid fucking fetus.

She needed to think. She got into Brown. You’d expect she was smart enough to convince one person to help a pregnant girl not get stabbed in the middle of the night by a pissed off teammate.

Shauna’s eyes lit up.

“I get what you mean, and I agree.” She stepped closer under Tai’s curious gaze. “But we need to think about this logically. If Jackie pisses people off here, it’s not like we can just put her in a timeout. With how high emotions are already, her actions might start something. Maybe even something violent from the others.”

She could tell she had Tai’s attention now. “You have a good point.” Her lips thinned, and brows scrunched together as she thought. “We do all need to chill out, and getting Jackie to pitch in would stop lowering morale.”

Shauna nodded. “Okay. So, any ideas?”

“I mean, I could use some help with the wood, I guess.” Tai shrugged.

“No!” Tai jerked backward, and Shauna’s eyes widened. “Uh… Okay, so listen, Jackie didn’t want me to tell anyone, so this has to stay between us. She’d kill me if she knew you knew.”

Tai’s brow raised as her expression changed to curiosity.

Well, Jackie asked her not to tell anyone she was pregnant.

“She’s sick. Like really sick, Tai. I don’t know if you heard me earlier, but I keep finding her throwing up.” Shauna forced her brow to lower and her lip to quiver.

“Oh, shit, Shauna. I didn’t know.” Tai stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. ‘Does she know what it is?’ Her grip tightened like she wanted to prevent Shauna from suddenly storming off. “And uh, have you considered it could be something else?” Tai eyed the large disgusting bowl of bloody rags, and Shauna hated that Tai was always so perceptive.

“Well, I thought the same thing at first, but no, it was umm”—Shauna glanced at the bowl again— “blood.”

Tai gaped at her. “Blood? She was throwing up blood? Holy shit.”

“Yeah, it was terrifying,” Shauna said. “Which is why I don’t want her to overwork herself. So, any ideas?”

Tai looked at Jackie, wearing headphones and grumpily throwing batteries from a dead Walkman on the ground. “Wow, I never thought I’d feel bad for Jackie Taylor.”

Shauna glared at an oblivious Jackie, wondering why she insisted on being so difficult out here.

Tai turned back, and Shauna fixed her expression so it looked downtrodden. “Alright, I’ll help you figure something out.”

Shauna grinned at her. “Thank you!”

Shauna popped the deer’s knee out, and Tai looked away with a grimace.

On the surface, Shauna stayed placid and calm. Internally, though, her heart was pounding, and blood pumped hotly through her veins. Out here, cutting into deer was the most thrilling thing she did.

That excitement she felt needed to be kept as a closely guarded secret. Not even Jackie knew what kind of sick enjoyment Shauna got from doing this.

It was just another thing Shauna needed to keep from her. Brown, Jeff (that cliche, inept, stupid dickhead who wouldn't know a condom if Shauna shoved it down his throat), and now this. No one would understand the rush she got with every cut and slash and splash of blood, but especially not Jackie.

Tai glanced back. "I don't know how you're so calm when you do all that." She shuddered. "The noises alone."

Shauna broke from her trance and shrugged, still with that same peaceful expression.

Tai shook her head at her. "Whatever. I'm going to ask around and see if anyone can sew so we can start mending clothes."

She had been as helpful as Shauna had hoped and, after pointing out how hard the handwashing was on their clothes, suggested Jackie could learn to help fix them.

It was the exact type of thing Shauna was hoping for, and she could've kissed Tai when she said it.

"Alright, thanks, Tai. Let me talk to Jackie." She looked over to a sullen Jackie sitting with the useless Walkman as everyone around her worked and ignored her.

Shauna sighed.

Tai followed her gaze and grimaced. "Good luck with that." She walked off with a shake of her head.

Shauna made her way over, and Jackie looked up. Her lips lifted into a smile before being covered by her hand smacking over her mouth. She looked away with clenched eyes.

She jogged the rest of the way over, getting the attention of those nearby, and flopped down to her knees in front of Jackie, putting her hands on her thighs as she looked up at her. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Shauna ignored the stares of anyone who wasn't Jackie, ready to do whatever was necessary to fix this.

Jackie kept pointedly looking away and muttered, "You have blood on your right cheek."

Shauna leaned back, absorbing her words. She had blood on her cheek. Her shoulders slumped like the weight of the world was on top of her.

She rubbed her cheek against her shoulder without removing her hands from Jackie. "Better?"

She looked back, and Jackie's hand was hesitant as it pulled away from her mouth, like she still wasn't sure if the nausea had passed. A few moments passed, and she nodded, making Shauna sigh in relief.

Jackie glanced around and looked hesitant. She noticed everyone had stopped to stare. Shauna noticed, too. She thought for a moment and then leaned toward Jackie.

“Lean on me,” she whispered, knowing this was a good opportunity.

Shauna moved forward and ignored the flicker of irritation in Jackie’s eyes, which turned into reluctant acceptance as she slumped forward into her arms.

She pulled Jackie up to stand, supporting most of her weight. Her hand went to Jackie’s waist, and she ignored the hitch of her breath to draw her in close. Jackie’s brow furrowed, and it was one of the few times having so many eyes on her seemed to bother her, as her cheeks were pink.

Shauna tightened her grip on Jackie, and they trudged to the cabin. Those around them watched with compassionate, worried stares, just as she hoped.

Making it inside the surprisingly empty cabin, Shauna helped Jackie into a chair.

She stood and put her hands on the armrests to lean closer to look at Jackie. “You good?”

Jackie looked up at her with red cheeks and got lost in her thoughts. Shauna’s face twisted, and she felt equally irritated and worried as Jackie stared at her silently.

Her hand left the chair to squeeze Jackie’s shoulder, and she took a breath to resist snapping before speaking. “Jackie. Are you okay?”

Jackie shook her head, and her red cheeks calmed to a less dramatic light pink. She pushed at Shauna’s chest and huffed. “I’m fine. Stop looming over me, Shipman.”

Shauna stood with a scowl.

“Was that show also part of your plan to make everyone feel bad for me?” Jackie grumbled with crossed arms.

“Yes.”

Jackie sighed and looked down with a frown. “Of course it was,” she muttered.

Shauna tilted her head to the side, wondering what that meant, but she decided to let it go so she could speak to her. “Tai and I talked. She had a good idea about a job for you.”

Jackie groaned and tilted her head back. “Can’t these be extenuating circumstances?”

Shauna felt an enormous flare of aggravation go through her body as she stared at Jackie’s glum expression. She took a large breath, resisted the urge to snap at her or storm from the cabin altogether, and let her deal with this alone.

It was tempting, but even Shauna knew that a fucking baby, a pregnancy, was not the time to let her lousy temper get the best of her. She was sure it would eventually, as Jackie always brought that out in her.

Shauna made Jackie better, and Jackie made Shauna worse. It’s been her reality since they were children, and sometimes she wasn’t sure if she wants to stop Jackie from taking all her good, or shove it at her on waited knee so Jackie could have it all to herself.

“You can’t be the only one not working and taking advantage of all of us.”

Jackie crossed her arms and stared at the wall with a scowl. “Lottie’s not doing anything either.”

Shauna rolled her eyes. “Lottie is being weird as fuck lately, and you are so much better than throwing other people under the bus like that.”

Jackie’s shoulders climbed up to her ears, and she looked down with a subdued expression. Shauna’s arm twitched to reach out and see if she was ok. Jackie sighed, her face back to normal. “Ugh, fine! What job?”

“Sewing,” Tai said, walking inside with Akilah.

“I don’t know how to sew,” Jackie said, her eyes flicking to Shauna before staring curiously at Tai and Akilah.

Tai smiled and gestured to Akilah. “Akilah has agreed to teach you.”

Shauna looked at Jackie and got ready to interject, expecting her to start on some kinda bullshit again.

Jackie paused and looked thoughtful for a moment. She then stood and turned to Akilah with one of her pretty smiles that always put everyone at ease. “Wow, thanks, Akilah! That’s really nice of you.”

Shauna knew her mouth had fallen open as she watched Jackie walk up to the other girl, whose body loosened from the stiff defensive stance it’d had been in since she first walked in.

Akilah smiled back, and then Shauna considered that maybe Jackie had a point. She should be able to laze around all day away from everyone except Shauna, who would begrudgingly do whatever Jackie wanted.

Tai walked up to Shauna with a smile. “Looking into some new jobs for people was a good idea. Maybe everyone will stop wanting to kill each other now.”

Shauna crossed her arms and grumbled, “Whatever.”

Tai looked at her quizzically and then turned to where Jackie was happily chatting with a slowly warming Akilah. She rolled her eyes and nudged Shauna. “C’mon, let’s see if anyone needs clothes to be mended.”

Shauna forced her eyes away and walked over to her bag. She found a flannel that got caught on a tree and had a large rip on one side.

She walked up to Jackie and Akilah and held it out. “Can you fix this?”

Akilah grabbed it and inspected it. “Yeah, it shouldn’t be too hard since it’s a tear, not a hole.”

Jackie ran her fingers over the dark red and blue flannel. “Aw, this was my favorite one.”

Shauna coughed lightly and ignored the heat she could feel blossoming on her cheeks. “Umm, you can use that to help her practice, Akilah.”

Akilah looked back and forth between them and then at Tai standing nearby. Some silent exchange happened between them that Shauna wasn’t privy to, and then a much more amused-looking Akilah nodded. “Sounds good.”

Shauna turned back to Jackie with a smile and saw she was giving her that soft look that she'd always reserved only for her, never anyone else, even Jeff.

The father of the spawn growing inside her.

Her smile slipped, and Jackie's tender glance slid away.

Shauna continued past and muttered, "If you can fix it, you can keep it, Jackie. It's going to get cold soon."

"Okay. Thanks, Shauna," Jackie quietly replied to her back.

It was only an hour later that a grinning Jackie came out with a smiling Akilah in tow.

Shauna rolled her eyes. How did Jackie always make everyone love her so fast? If it were her in there, Akilah probably wouldn't even like her yet.

"Okay, guys! I was talking to Akilah, and I had a brainstorm. We should have a seance!"

Shauna was going to bash her own head through a wall. Why could Jackie not just stick to the sewing and being mysteriously sick thing to make everyone stop hating her? The plan was perfect.

She tuned them out and contemplated running away to live in a cave away from all this stress.

"…Shauna, tell them it'll be fun."

She blinked back into awareness and saw everyone staring at her. "Huh?"

Jackie was looking at her with wide eyes, trying to signal something to her, but unfortunately for her, Shauna was exhausted and not in the mood for this.

She shrugged and turned with a sigh. "Do whatever you want, guys. I'm gonna take a walk."

She could hear an awkward silence being left in her wake, but she ignored it to take a minute to cool off. She was frustrated that, as usual, Jackie did whatever the hell she wanted and just ignored what Shauna said.

"Uh, w-well. Akilah! It'll be fun, right? That's what you uh said a few minutes ago…" Jackie trailed off and sounded uncomfortable. Her voice had that nasally quality that meant she was on the brink of tears.

Shauna considered going back and apologizing. Maybe she'd say she hadn't understood the question.

No, Jackie was the one who brought up the stupid game, and she could deal with it herself. She shook her head and continued away, barely hearing a hesitant Akilah respond, "I don't know, maybe they're right, and it would be kinda lame…"

She kept walking mindlessly, not paying attention to where she was going except that it was straight and forward. The forest seemed so much more peaceful than the area around the cabin. Rays of sun split through the leaves of the trees and shadowed the ground in mindless

patterns. A heavy, cool breeze blew against her back every so often. The typical sounds of nature went out around her: bugs, the wind blowing through trees, and a few birds nearby.

CRACK

A sharp, awful pain ran across her cheek, and then a hole exploded into the tree next to her.

“What the fuck?!” she yelled as she reached up and held her bleeding face. Her face was already throbbing, with every heartbeat causing another flare of suffering.

Shauna squeezed her eyes shut, forcing back tears as she breathed deeply and tried to get past the pain. She had no clue what just happened, but whatever, it was hurt like a bitch.

“Oh my god! Shit! Fuck! Shit, shit, shit!”

She opened her eyes again and felt some of the pain already start to ease with every quickening beat of her heart.

A person came hurtling from the trees nearby and skidded to a stop before her. It was Natalie. She reached forward and clutched Shauna’s shoulders, looking her over desperately. There were tears already spilling from her eyes, and she was letting out little desperate pants.

Shauna’s eyes widened in alarm, and she forgot all about her bleeding face at the pure terror on Natalie’s face. She let go of her cheek to grab the arms still grasping her. “Nat, breathe.”

Natalie ignored her whimpering at the sight of blood freely flowing down Shauna’s cheek. The feeling of steadily leaking liquid was becoming more distracting than the throbbing pain.

“I shot Shauna. I shot Shauna. I shot Shauna,” Natalie started muttering over and over and tried to reach up to touch her cheek.

Shauna grabbed it and pulled it down just as a sweaty, heavily breathing Travis came up from the same direction Natalie had. He cursed and ran up to them.

“We thought you were a deer,” Travis panted out.

Shauna looked up like she could see the top of her head. “It’s not like I have antlers.”

Travis, still breathing like he had run a marathon, pointed up, and Shauna raised her head some more to see that, unluckily, a low-hanging branch a few inches above her head looked like it could be mistaken for antlers.

“Huh. Tall deer.”

Travis pursed his lips, and Natalie shook her. “Will you stop fucking around? There’s a hole in your cheek!”

Shauna grimaced and then stopped, as that hurt. “I’m fine. It just grazed me.”

They must’ve been panicked if they didn’t realize Shauna probably wouldn’t have a cheek at all if the bullet her like they seemed to think.

Natalie leaned back, and even Travis looked shocked. “No, I saw you too late after I shot at you. That was going right into your head.”

Shauna frowned at her and then glanced to her left at the hole in the tree, making them both look at it with wide eyes. “Well, it didn’t. I’m fine.” A drop of blood dripped from her cheek onto her shirt. “Relatively.”

Natalie finally stepped back and shared a loaded look with Travis. She reached forward and finally grabbed Shauna’s cheek. “It’s not possible…”

“Well, unless I have a protective mystical shield on me now, I think you just need to practice your shots more,” Shauna said with a small, awkward smile that she dropped again as she remembered that still hurt.

Natalie and Travis leaned closer, looking like they were checking for a shield around her.

She pushed away Natalie’s hand. “Okay, shooting aside. It’s probably best I ran into you guys, anyway. I’m pretty sure I would’ve been wandering around these woods for hours. I… wasn’t paying as much attention as I should’ve been.”

Natalie’s brow furrowed. “How did you even get all the way out here?”

Shauna looked at her like she was crazy. “I walked?”

“We’re like five miles out from camp. Why did you go so far?” Travis said with his arms crossed.

“I… what? It felt like I was only walking for a few minutes.” She looked up and noticed the sun had moved more than possible for a fifteen-minute walk.

Natalie and Travis looked spooked, and Shauna shrugged and said, “I must’ve lost track of time… I guess.”

“Right…” They shared another loaded look.

Shauna was losing her patience. Her cheek was still throbbing and releasing little burning spikes of pain. Her face was wet and felt tacky, making it weird to move, and her collar was sticking to her skin. “Can you guys just lead me back to the cabin without being weird?”

“Uh… yeah, sure,” Natalie said hesitantly.

Shauna rolled her eyes and turned around. At least she knew which way she came from.

They followed her a few steps behind, and their whispering wasn’t nearly as quiet as they thought.

“How does she know which way to go?”

“I thought she was lost?”

“Maybe she was lying.”

“It’s five miles, Trav. I don’t think she was lying.”

“Do you think she just knows somehow?”

“I don’t—I mean…”

“That bullet was headed straight for her head. I know it was.”

Shauna stopped, and the two behind her stopped immediately. She turned and looked at them with furrowed brows.

Travis went to step forward, but Natalie held him back, so they both lingered behind. “Do you… need directions?” she said.

Shauna examined their faces, and finally, she noticed it. There was a little gleam of awe in their eyes. She thought momentarily, looking at their expressions that were just on the edge of worship.

She had an idea.

“Nope. Thanks, I got it.” Shauna was about to bullshit her way into getting a soccer team to protect Jackie and her little parasite, and all she had to do was get a small cut on her face.

## 2. Charge

They stepped into the cabin clearing with Natalie and Travis following behind Shauna like they were her disciples—something they'd done the entire five miles there.

She looked at the cabin and the girls working around it, and she couldn't help mouthing the words, "Holy shit," to herself.

Walking back without asking them for help had been a big gamble, but if the increasing awe in their eyes was anything to go by, it'd been well worth it.

"Shauna! What happened to your face?" Tai said as she jogged over.

"Huh?" The pain had turned into a dull throb in the back of her mind that she'd forced herself to stop thinking about, and the adrenaline that still hadn't worn off after their brisk walk back helped her pretend the annoying stickiness on her face was the worst of her problems.

Tai gestured to her cheek, and a Yellowjacket nearby winced and ran inside.

The reminder of her new scratch brought with it a spike of pain that she vehemently ignored in favor of getting through this confrontation first.

Shauna hesitated. This was a really big deal. If she fucked it up now, then this would never work. How do people usually get others to worship them?

Maybe it'd sound less crazy from someone else.

Waving her hand over her shoulder, she gestured to Natalie and Travis. "They seem to have seen it differently than me." She shrugged. "Can you tell them what you said happened?"

A weight slammed into her back. "Shauna!"

Travis moved forward and steadied her, giving her a deep nod, and she hesitated before returning it. "Thank you so much, Travis. That was really helpful."

Being super nice to them is a good idea, right?

Going by the way his shoulders went back and the small smile on his face, Shauna decided to keep doing that.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and twisted her around to a frantic Jackie. "What happened to her face?" she snapped, clutching Shauna's flannel like she was afraid she'd disappear.

Tai threw her hands in the air. "Shauna won't tell us. She said to ask them." She gestured to an uncomfortable Natalie and Travis.

Natalie handed the rifle over to Travis and looked down in shame. "It was my fault."

Shauna grabbed Jackie around the waist. Just in case.

Jackie narrowed her eyes at Shauna and then turned back to Nat with her arms crossed. “What was your fault? She has a giant gash on her face!”

Natalie took a deep breath, looking down at the ground. “I shot her.”

“You what?!” Jackie jolted forward, and Shauna knew she was smart to grab her in advance.

Travis’ jaw was tense as he put a hand on her shoulder. “It was an accident. We thought she was a deer.”

“Was the lack of antlers not a big fucking clue?!” Tai stomped forward, and someone needed to grab her before she attacked the only two people in this camp who saw what happened and could tell everyone about it.

Van pulled Tai back, making Shauna sigh in relief.

“Shauna let go of me.” Jackie pushed against her, but she’s never been known for her upper body strength, so it got her nowhere.

She gave Travis an encouraging nod, and he took over as Natalie still seemed so seeped in guilt.

“There were these branches… they were like, perfectly over her head.” He looked down with a furrowed brow. “It was really weird, honestly.”

Natalie spoke again with a crackle in her voice, speaking more to her shoes than the rest of them. “I took the shot and noticed it was Shauna too late.”

“How the fuck do you not notice the difference between a person and a deer?!” Jackie snapped, pulling against her arm.

Natalie’s head dropped further, and the shame on her face was clear. “Th-the bullet was going right for her head, and then somehow, as soon as it got to her, it veered off into a tree beside her. It didn’t make any sense!”

Van’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Shauna should have a big fucking hole in her head right now!” Nat yelled.

Jackie stiffened in her arms, and she stopped trying to escape to clutch Shauna tighter to her.

“She walked five miles without even realizing it, and somehow could figure out her way back without even having to ask. It was crazy,” Travis said, voice full of wonder.

Van contemplated her. “How did you do that?”

Shauna absentmindedly ran her hand up and down Jackie’s stiff back, and shrugged. “I kept having a feeling, like something was guiding me. I can’t really explain it.”

Tai broke from Van’s grip and eyed Shauna incredulously. “Y’know what? I don’t care, just let someone clean up your face. This is so stupid.”

She walked away, and Van followed after staring at Shauna for another few seconds.

The others wandered off too after shooting her curious looks.

Natalie's eyes hadn't moved from her shoes, and Travis stood comforting her.

She slowly let go of Jackie, who was staring at Shauna like she'd never seen her before. Nodding to her, she walked over to them.

Reaching forward, she squeezed them both on the shoulders. "Thanks for the help." She increased the grip on Natalie's shoulder to get her attention. "And uh don't worry about it, seriously. It's okay."

Shauna walked past Jackie but was stopped by a harsh grip on her arm. "'Don't worry about? It's okay?' Why are you so calm about having been fucking shot?!"

She opened her mouth and then closed it. Shauna thought for a second and then tried again. "Do you remember the last time I got stitches?"

Jackie frowned and leaned back to look at her. "Umm… sixth grade? When you fell off your bike?"

Shauna nodded. "And remember how I had to get the stitches?"

Jackie's lips twitched into a smile. "You mean how you wouldn't let go of my hand the whole time?"

She shrugged and smirked, raising her left hand.

Jackie sighed, grabbing it. "Fine, let's go."

---

Jackie didn't let go of her hand the entire time Akilah sewed up her face, and like most things to do with Jackie these days, Shauna wasn't sure how to feel about it. The feeling of her palm in hers made the emotions swirling in her gut rotate between irritation, nostalgia, and then love.

That last one was the worst of the three.

She'd asked her to hold her hand to distract Jackie. Shauna had forgotten that would mean Jackie would sit there while she was in pain, soothing her when she winced.

Shauna was more comfortable with the reverse. Because Jackie doing all that for Shauna? Well, that just reminds her of what she can't have.

She kept eyeing Jackie as she stared down at their connected hands, wondering what she was thinking about.

"This is gonna scar Shauna. I'm really sorry, there's only so much I can do," Akilah said.

Shauna turned her attention to her and shrugged. "It's fine. I know you did what you could."

Jackie's hand held hers tighter. "It's not fine! I'm gonna kill Natalie."

Shauna's lips parted, but Akilah interrupted her before she could say anything. "Is, um, all that true? What Natalie and Travis said."

There were some creeks and shuffling nearby, and it was obvious the others were listening.

“All I know is, one second I’m walking, and then the next I hear a loud noise and I have this”—she pointed at her face— “and then something is telling me how to get back here so it can be stitched up.”

She ignored Jackie’s stare boring into the left side of her face.

“Wow…” Akilah’s brow furrowed, and she looked hesitant as she trailed off.

“Did you want to ask me something?”

“Was there also a feeling for why you asked me and not Misty to do this?”

The real answer was Shauna didn’t want to deal with Misty’s yapping, and she knew Akilah could sew, but she might as well use this as an opportunity for something else instead.

“No, actually, Jackie suggested you because of how good your sewing was.” She glanced at Jackie out of the corner of her eye to see her giving her a wide-eyed look.

Akilah beamed. “Wow! Thanks, Jackie!”

Jackie’s hand loosened around Shauna’s, and this time it was her who increased the grip. She looked back and forth between Shauna’s placid stare and Akilah’s wide grin before looking down with a frown. “You’re welcome. It’s the truth, anyway.”

Shauna squeezed her hand again, and Jackie’s sighed before squeezing back.

Akilah used Shauna’s knife to cut the last of the string used to sew her face together. “Okay, all done.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Can you tell me, if you ever get like a feeling again o-or figure out a way to protect yourself like you did?”

Shauna smiled and ignored the odd way her face pulled with the stitches. “Of course. You’ll be one of the first to hear about it.” She hesitated, wondering if it was a good idea, and decided it would be fine. “And if you have questions about it, I’m sure Travis wouldn’t mind answering.”

Akilah bobbed her head up and down with a smile. “Okay, thanks, guys.”

She got up and walked away to whisper to some of the other JV girls, who glanced back over a few times.

A hand landed on her shoulder, and she looked over to see it was Jackie’s. “Can we talk?” She peered around at the people eyeing them. “Privately.”

---

“Okay, what’s up, Jax?” Shauna asked when they reached a secluded spot.

Jackie turned to her and grabbed her chin to bring her face closer to inspect it.

“Umm.”

“Let me just…” she sighed, shaking her head. “I wasn’t able to get a good look. I wanted to make sure it wasn’t too bad.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t nauseous,” Shauna said. The only time she’d ever seen Jackie this focused before was during a penalty kick.

“I’m too worried about you to be nauseous,” she murmured. Jackie’s finger trailed to her cheek, and she circled around it without touching the stitched up wound. Jackie sighed out a large breath at whatever she saw.

Shauna swallowed as Jackie’s finger ghosted across her skin, and warm puffs of air landed on her face. Her eyes fluttered shut, and then the hot breaths got closer and closer. Jackie hesitated, and Shauna almost opened her eyes again to peek, but then very gentle lips landed on her cheek, right next to a stitch.

Her breath hitched, and she opened her eyes to see Jackie still very close to her face, looking at her hesitantly.

Shauna flicked her eyes around, trying to read her expression. Her eyes were half lidded, her lower lip being chewed on by a white tooth.

“What did you want to talk about again?” Shauna said, her voice unsteady.

Jackie’s half-lidded eyes turned narrow and annoyed, as she scowled and stepped back.

Shauna’s expression followed, aggravated at the look, like Jackie believed Shauna had done something wrong. She went to this stupid field like Jackie asked. Shauna let Jackie do… whatever that was.

And that’s not to mention the fact she’s starting a fucking cult here just for Jackie and her spawn.

Jackie examined Shauna’s expression and crossed her arms. “What are you doing?”

Shauna looked around, now very confused. “Standing in a field? What do you mean?”

Jackie scoffed, and Shauna’s fists clenched.

She started counting backwards from ten. Shauna cannot flip out on Jackie right now. Jackie was pregnant. Calm down. Her heart stopped beating in her ears and her fists loosened.

Jackie glanced at her hands and sighed. “Why are you pretending like you believe in stuff like that, Shauna? The feelings and getting saved from a bullet.” Jackie rolled her eyes.

“It’s easier to go along with it. Plus, I can keep an eye on everyone this way.” Shauna shrugged. After Jackie started contributing, she was sure they would find something else to focus on, but Shauna would still be wary of everyone.

Jackie stared, face still covered in confusion. “I’m not really following you here.”

After a moment of thought, Shauna figured the best thing to do was just tell Jackie something to make her happy, so they could stop talking about this. “I’m doing it to protect you.”

Not a lie, just really vague, and only being put out there so Jackie would stop thinking about this so much. Shauna knew Jackie well enough to guess that she wouldn’t be happy about Shauna starting a cult to protect her.

Jackie's brow furrowed, and a hesitant smile grew on her lips. "Oh… okay."

Shauna nodded and went to walk away when Jackie dragged her back and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. She wrapped her arms around her in return, and her limbs tightened at Jackie's pleased hum.

"You wouldn't keep something big from me, right, Shauna?" Jackie asked into her ear.

Shauna thought through the list of things she was keeping a secret from her: Brown, Jeff, deer, cult.

She leaned back and squeezed Jackie's shoulders with a smile and shook her head no.

Was it still a lie if she didn't say it?

---

They took their time walking back to the cabin, letting themselves enjoy the evening air and the rare solitude.

"So are you doing your seance thing tonight?" Shauna said with a glance.

"No! After you left, no one would do it with me." Jackie crossed her arms and pouted.

Shauna examined her expression and could see there was some genuine hurt, and she felt a little bad, but Jackie could deal. She's allowed to say… huh.

Her feet slowed and then stopped. Jackie took a few steps forward and then paused, turning to her. "What's the matter?"

"I didn't do your seance, and you're not doing that thing where you ignore me and try to make me jealous by talking to other girls," Shauna said wonderingly.

Jackie stumbled back a step, and her face turned bright red as her eyes grew wide. "I don't do that!"

Shauna put a hand to her chin in thought and absentmindedly said, "You do it all the time. It's one of the most annoying things you do."

"One of…" her jaw dropped.

Shauna turned to her. "Why didn't you do it this time?"

Jackie studied her expression, and then she walked back with her arms crossed and a scowl. "Shauna, you were shot in the fucking face today. Do you think I still care about the dumb seance?"

She was using that tone. The imperious. I'm better than you. You're a lowly peasant not worth my respect tone. Shauna *loathed* when Jackie used that tone.

"I never know with you, Jackie," she snapped.

Jackie threw her arms up. "Know what?!"

"How selfish you're going to be!"

Jackie's mouth dropped open, and her eyes became wet. "The answer is obviously no! I don't care about playing a stupid game after my best friend gets shot in the face." She huffed. "You're infuriating."

She turned and started marching back to the cabin.

Shauna watched her walk off, and she stood there, fury building. Her anger always felt like it came out of nowhere, but she knew it was just weeks or months of little things coalescing into something larger than its parts.

Her mind was spiraling. She was thinking too much, one transgression reminding her of another and then of another again. Shauna was always the builder who constructed her bad temper. She did it to herself, brick by brick.

Jackie having the audacity to call anyone else infuriating. Jackie acting surprised, as if she doesn't throw a fit whenever Shauna doesn't do what she wanted. Jackie being fucking pregnant with Jeff Sadecki's spawn. Jackie. Jackie. Jackie!

Her breathing was picking up, and her heart was beating out of her chest. Thoughts and feelings, and memories of things that hadn't mattered in years flew through her as her jaw clenched so hard Shauna knew she'd be getting a headache later.

She started counting backwards from ten. Ten, nine, eight, seven—

Shauna turned and punched a tree with a shout, a thump sounded, and a shock went up her arm. A few wood chips fell to the ground at her feet. The forest silenced.

She looked down at her clenched, shaking hand. The sight of red knuckles and specks of blood made her breathing even out and her heart slow.

Then she took a deep breath and enjoyed the slight ache that came from her hand. It reminded her she still had some kind of control over this situation. She could choose to punch something so hard she got cuts and bruises.

Shauna flexed her hand a few times and knew it'd be fine.

---

Shauna laid down on her cot, still so close to Jackie's, that it wouldn't be wrong to think of it as one large bundle on the floor instead of two smaller ones.

Jackie had turned away from her, not acknowledging her, but Shauna knew she was still awake.

Her breathing wasn't right. There was just a second too long in the hitch of Jackie's inhale.

She thought about nudging her to turn around, or picking up her bundle and pillow and finding somewhere else to sleep, or just turning over and ignoring Jackie.

Shauna fell asleep staring at the ceiling.

---

The next morning, she woke up to find Jackie already awake, blearily eating breakfast with Akilah sitting next to her, telling her something Shauna was too far away to hear.

She could tell this wasn't one of Jackie's games designed to piss her off. Whenever she did that, Jackie would always glance constantly in her direction to make sure Shauna was watching.

It wasn't necessary though, Shauna was always watching.

But, in this case, she could tell that Jackie seemed too tired for games, and hadn't even noticed Shauna was there yet. There was a small flicker of annoyance—there always would be when she saw Jackie giving anyone else attention—but for once, affection and warmth easily overtook it.

She was awake and trying. And *listening* to Shauna. It was a miracle.

Jackie looked up, still looking half asleep, and did a double take when she noticed Shauna leaning against a support for the porch and staring at her. Shauna smiled, and after a second of hesitation, Jackie smiled back.

Shauna decided today would be a good day.

---

"Hey, Nat." Shauna walked up to where the bleached blonde sat with her chin against her knees.

She glanced up and then quickly flicked her gaze down. "Shauna," she muttered.

Shauna examined her. Going by the way Natalie wouldn't look at her face and was on the brink of tears. It was clear she still felt guilty about the shooting. Shauna needed her to get over it. She really didn't care. If anything, Natalie did her a favor by shooting her in the face.

Jackie, however, taking a break on the porch and glaring daggers at Natalie, did not seem to agree.

Shauna eyed her and then turned back to Natalie with a sigh.

"I think your girl is plotting my murder," Natalie said with a small twitch of her lips.

"I think you could take her. Don't worry."

Natalie laughed. "That's not saying much. I'm pretty sure Javi could take her, too."

Shauna hummed, and then finally got to why she was there. "A bunch of us are going to the plane to scavenge it. I was hoping you'd come."

"Me? Why?" Her eye caught Shauna's cheek and her face dropped.

"We'd all probably feel safer if someone was armed. We don't know what's out there." Natalie's mouth opened to speak, so Shauna continued, "Besides, with the way our luck is going, we'd probably run into a bunch of deer with no way to kill them."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I doubt that." She sighed and kicked some dirt around. "Ask Travis."

Shauna tried to figure out how to deal with Natalie's new listlessness. Travis wouldn't be able to do everything by himself, so Shauna really need her to stop feeling sorry for herself.

"Stop being such a baby. C'mon, we're leaving now." Shauna turned and waved Natalie on.

Wide eyes stared at her from below as Natalie gaped up at her. "What?"

Shauna pulled her up, pushing her toward where Tai was talking to Van, Mari, and a few of the JV girls that Shauna should probably learn the names of. "Let's go."

Natalie tried to dig her heels in, but one more shove from Shauna finally made her walk over on her own. "Fuck! Okay, I'm going!"

"What's going on?"

Shauna turned to find Jackie standing a couple of feet behind her with her arms crossed. "We're going to scavenge the plane."

Jackie looked down with a frown.

She sighed and stepped closer. "What?" She silently begged Jackie not to ruin what had been a good day so far.

Jackie looked up at her face and lingered on her stitches. She sighed and stepped forward to bring Shauna into a hug. "Just be careful, please."

Shauna hugged her back, confused, but relieved that this wouldn't be an argument. "Uh, sure. Okay."

Jackie stepped back and rolled her eyes.

She felt like she said something wrong. Maybe Jackie would be happy if Shauna showed she cared about her wellbeing, too. "Um, did you throw up today?"

That didn't even sound good in Shauna's head. Why did she say that?

Jackie stepped back and looked at her like she wanted to ask if the bullet somehow scrambled her brains. She studied Shauna's face again and then shook her head. "I'll see you later, Shauna."

She nodded and turned around. Shauna needed to get away from her before she came up with something else stupid to say.

---

She and Tai walked in the back of the group making their way to the plane. The only sound between them was the crunch of their boots on the grass, and their heavy breathing when they went up hills. It took until Tai's third searching glance that Shauna finally grew tired of it.

"What?"

"Why are you trying to make people think you have magical powers?" Tai said with no hesitation.

Shauna took a deep breath in and out. She figured this confrontation was coming. “Natalie and Travis were the ones who told you what happened, not me.”

She was trying her best to keep to to vague half-truths instead of outright lies to make this whole cult thing work—Shauna had not been very successful at this thus far. Her mother would catch her in those sometimes too, and call them lies by another name, but Shauna disagreed.

Tai scoffed. “And you’re the one who said you just ‘had a feeling’ to figure out how to get back.”

Shauna stopped and nodded at her. “I did. I’m sorry if you don’t believe that, but it’s true.”

She wasn’t lying. Shauna did have a feeling. She had felt like she should walk back the way she came.

Tai’s step stuttered as she stopped on the path. Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at Shauna. “You’re actually being serious right now? You’re really going to let this be a thing?”

Shauna shrugged. “I’m not doing anything.”

Tai scoffed and sped ahead.

A girl with a baseball cap dropped to Shauna’s side. “Hey, so. Can you give me a shield, too?”

Shauna eyed her, trying to remember her name. She shook her head. It wasn’t coming to her. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“Damn.” She ran ahead. “She said no, Gen!”

---

They arrived at the plane, and Shauna sighed as she saw the mess they’d have to go through. “I’ll start cutting seats. You guys pull.”

She took her knife out and got through a few while the others went to work. She was in the middle of cutting one when she grumbled to a waiting Natalie, “Remind me to sharpen some sticks or something when we get back. This one knife thing is stupid.”

Natalie scoffed. “You really trust some of these people with something pointy?”

They both turned to two JV girls shoving each other and being broken apart by a shouting Taissa.

Shauna hummed. “Fair point.”

She rose with a sigh and rubbed her back. Leaning over like this so much was killing her.

Natalie slapped her on the shoulder and started pulling away the seat.

“I’m gonna start bringing this stuff outside.”

She maneuvered around Tai—who refused to acknowledge her—and grabbed the material from the ground.

Making her way outside, she took a deep breath of the air, glad to be out of the stuffy plane, even if only for a moment. It was a nice sunny day, with only a light breeze, and the wind ruffling the trees was the only sounds of nature she could hear.

*Crunch*

Her head whipped around to see a deer nearby. It'd been wandering through the grass, not having noticed her yet.

With wide eyes, and a heart pounding with excitement, she called out, "Natalie! Get the rifle!"

The deer spun towards her, and the grin that had grown on her face dropped. There was something wrong with it.

A series of footsteps ran towards her.

She took a step forward, too intrigued by what she was seeing to realize why that was a stupid idea.

But, it was just so weird, and fascinating. The deer's antlers were a glossy red and dripping, almost oozing. It seemed like something was hanging off of them, too. She took another step closer and realized what it looked like. Flesh. It looked like some type of skin was stuck to them.

Did the deer use its antlers to fight another animal? Was that common?

She looked into the deer's eyes, and that's when she realized. There was something *wrong* with this thing. It wasn't just its antlers, the look in its eyes was not normal. It almost looked like they were too wide and big. Like it was furious…

"Shauna, move! You're too close!" Natalie called from behind her.

The deer startled and huffed out a breath. And the wild eyes got closer as it turned and ran straight at her.

"Shoot it!" Tai screamed.

"I can't! I might hit her!"

The deer got closer, with the loud galloping of its footsteps overtaking the screams of multiple girls behind Shauna. The tremble in her limbs worsened from the pounding of the ground nearby.

She hoped Jackie and her… baby, got out of here and had the happiest lives possible.

The snort of a large breath blew her hair around her face. She could smell the thing—because that's what it was, a *thing*—as it got close. The death and decay that lingered on it was pungent.

The antlers got near enough she could count the individual strands of fur on whatever's skin was still stuck to them.

Then, she heard a loud *SNAP*, and it veered to the right, like something grabbed it and pulled. Missing Shauna by inches, by millimeters, by a hair.

It took a few more wobbling steps and collapsed. Leaving a large cloud of dirt to fly up in its wake.

She turned and stared at it. It was still. Not one panting breath releasing from its bloated body. Dead.

Her eye caught its front right leg at the sight of something bright white. A bone was sticking out, broken. It'd snapped clean through the deer's skin.

Tai grabbed Shauna's shoulders and examined her, panicked. "Are you okay? Where did it hit you?!"

The other girls slowly joined them, and they looked like they were about to kneel and start asking Shauna for blessings.

She breathed out, and ignored her pounding heart, to say, as clear and sure as possible, "It didn't touch me."

---

They made their way back to camp with the deer being carried by Van and Mari, and everyone else carrying what they could of the plane scraps.

All of them kept peering back to stare at Shauna like she was going to suddenly start glowing and perform some miracles.

Except Tai. She kept looking at Shauna like she was afraid she was wrong about the deer missing her and she was going to collapse at any second.

Shauna was doing this for Jackie and her… baby—she's decided she'd try calling it that for now. But she couldn't pretend that she wasn't enjoying being looked at with awe and worship, too.

She could get used to this.

"Ugh, it stinks," Mari muttered.

Tai sighed and said, "It could be coming from its antlers. Don't deer shed them? Or that stuff on it could be from another animal. It obviously likes to run at things."

She glanced at Shauna like she wanted to double check she was okay, and her heart felt a little fuller knowing how much Tai genuinely cared.

A smile graced her face, and Tai's lips twitched into her own to match.

Shauna's smile dropped, and she sighed. "I hope you're right Tai. I just get the feeling we're not going to be able to eat that thing."

The others stared, like she'd just made some kind of decree. Mari and Van looked a second away from dropping the deer, like one word from Shauna had made them want to bend to her will.

Tai became aggravated, and Shauna's eyes widened. "Uh, don't put it down. Maybe I'm wrong!"

The others gave each other doubtful looks, but they hitched the thing back on their shoulders, anyway. At least it appeased Tai. She gave Shauna a nod that she returned.

The cabin wasn't far, and they made their way in to great cheers from everyone. Their group didn't join in, still spooked from what happened and most not believing this was going to end with food.

Coach Ben came out with a grin, not put off at all by the sight of decay. "Deer shed their antlers every season. This is normal."

"Do they typically also charge at people and then fall over and die a second before hitting them?" Van huffed as she and Mari put the deer down.

"Uh… no," Ben said, looking puzzled.

Shauna looked up to see Jackie standing on the porch with a furrowed brow as she worried her lip. She smiled at her, and a small burst of warmth flared in her chest as Jackie smiled back.

"Did that actually happen?" Misty said, adjusting her glasses and scanning someone for an injury.

"Yeah, ran right at Shauna," Mari said with her arms crossed.

Jackie straightened, and her wide eyes darted around Shauna's form for injuries.

"I'm fine though!" she said, putting her hands up placatingly.

"Yeah, because you had your magic shield thing," the girl with the hat said with a decisive nod.

Tai groaned. "Be serious, guys!"

Van stared at Shauna. "Sorry Tai, but I'm with Melissa. That deer was right in her face and then it just bounced off to her side like it got pushed away."

Shauna stayed silent and let them make the case for her as Jackie scrambled from the porch toward her. She could only make it a few steps before her hand came up to her mouth. Shauna glanced behind her at the deer, wondering if it was the sight of it up close or the stench making Jackie nauseous.

She handed her knife to Travis, who was standing nearby, looking like he was eating up every word. "Can you get it started?"

He nodded his head up and down with wide eyes, and Shauna didn't even care that she'd miss the thrill of a first cut as she pulled Jackie into her side and led her away.

## 3. Wolves

**Yes:**

*Travis*

*Natalie*

*Van*

*Mari*

*Akilah*

*Other JV girls (learn names)*

Shauna flipped to the next page.

**Maybe:**

*Misty*

*Laura Lee*

*Lottie*

**No:**

*Tai*

*Ben*

She tapped her pencil on her list and tried to think how to move more people to yes.

Shauna already had a good idea about how to get Misty on her side.

She sighed and added, (be nice) next to her name.

Laura Lee would be more difficult. Maybe Shauna could say this was related to god somehow.

She shrugged and added, (convert) next to Laura Lee. Shauna's sure her rabbi would understand these were extenuating circumstances. Bat Mitzvahs probably rank higher than fake conversions in the wilderness, anyway.

Shauna looked at Lottie's name and hesitated. She'd rather not go with her initial idea for this. It seemed too cruel to do to someone obviously unwell.

She hummed in thought, and then wrote (Laura Lee) next to Lottie's name. That would have to do for now.

"What do you think, Shauna?"

She looked up from her place in the back and closed her journal. “Sorry, what’s happening?”

“Tai wants to go on an *expedition* to see if she can find civilization,” Van said, exasperated.

“Oh.” Shauna glanced around and noticed quite a few of them were looking at her, waiting to see what she’d say.

Her eyes caught Jackie’s, and she couldn’t help but let her eyes stray to her stomach. She wasn’t showing yet, but Shauna knew it’d only be a matter of time.

Jackie needed food, not dreams of a town that probably didn’t even exist.

“How far are you going?” Shauna asked, standing up.

“As far as it takes,” Tai said with a frown.

“You could walk till you drop dead doing that.”

Tai shook her head with a scowl. “Then at least I’ll die knowing I tried.”

“Is anyone else going?” Shauna said with crossed arms.

She noticed Mari and Akilah shuffling guiltily.

Okay, this was becoming a problem. Tai was taking away some of her best people. Akilah still needed to help Jackie learn to sew!

Her brow furrowed in thought, trying to think of something that made her and Tai both happy. The idea had some merit. It just shouldn’t be taking priority over getting Jackie food.

She turned to Nat and Travis. “What’s the furthest you guys have gone out?”

“Probably six or seven miles.”

Travis looked at Natalie, and she nodded. “Yeah, we didn’t want to go too much further with just the two of us.”

Shauna smiled. It was a perfect segue. “Tai, let’s compromise.”

Taissa looked at her warily. “Compromise how?”

“Take Natalie or Travis with you and the rifle.” Natalie’s mouth opened to argue, and Shauna spoke over her, “But they’ll do it to look for food, and stop after a certain point. Then whoever wants to go back can.”

Tai looked up in thought, and then slowly nodded. “Okay, so an expedition for food, and one to search. It’s… not the worst idea.” She glared. “But I’m not coming back before I look where I want.”

Van’s face filled with relief at hearing they’d have a rifle and a chance to return. She looked at Shauna like she determined if the sun rose and set.

The group dispersed, much calmer with the new plan in place.

Travis and Natalie walked up to her. Natalie had a scowl on her face and narrowed her eyes at Shauna as she got closer. Travis, in comparison, was stone faced and serious—

prepared for what was to come.

“Shauna, did you really have to volunteer us and the rifle like that?”

“I think she’s right, Nat. We need food, and they really need a guy out there with them, too,” Travis said with a determined nod.

Natalie scoffed, and said, “Yeah, we all need the big, strong man to protect us.”

Shauna looked between them awkwardly. The only times she found watching a couple argue enjoyable were when it was between Jackie and Jeff, and that was because Shauna knew it meant a breakup was on the horizon.

Shauna reached out and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s really brave of you, Travis. You’re a great guy.”

He grinned, and Shauna’s glad this being super nice thing seems to work so well.

Natalie pulled her away with a glare. “What are you doing?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” Shauna said, snatching her arm back from Natalie’s grip.

“Because you’re taking this thing too far.” Natalie said, exasperated.

“What thing?” Shauna frowned.

“This having magical powers, telling everyone what to do, thing! You’re going to get Travis killed!”

“You don’t think I have powers?” Shauna said with a frown. She’d been sure Natalie had believed her. Fuck. Shauna might need to drop her down to the no list.

She should double check everyone else listed in yes to be safe, too.

Natalie looked at her in disbelief. “No, I don’t think you have a magical fucking shield, Shauna!”

“Uh…” Jackie walked up to stand beside her. “What’s going on?”

Natalie rolled her eyes and stomped away. “Your girlfriend’s acting crazy.”

Shauna whipped her head toward Natalie. “Girlfriend?!”

“Crazy?!” Jackie said at the same time with a glare.

She turned back to a peeved Jackie with wide eyes. “Why does she think you’re crazy?” Jackie said.

Shauna blinked at her, and then shook her head to get her thoughts back on track.

“Uh, she’s just mad that Travis is going with them.”

Jackie nodded and smiled. “Well, I think it was a really good idea, Shipman.” She squeezed Shauna’s arm and walked away. “Nice job.”

Shauna watched her go with wide eyes.

---

Tai, Van, Akilah, Mari, Travis, and—surprisingly—Misty left on their expedition, and the cabin seemed a lot quieter. There wasn't that easy chatter that filled the area, or that feeling you get from another person lurking nearby. It was almost peaceful.

Jackie looked at the ladder considerably. "Do you think we should move up to the attic?"

Shauna felt a combination of affectionate butterflies in her stomach, and heart pounding aggravation at the way Jackie assumed it'd be them both moving up there together.

Jackie did ask for her opinion this time, though she'd done that before and ignored Shauna, anyway.

"Shauna?" Jackie said, concerned.

"Oh, uh, sorry. I got lost in thought." If she was being honest, Shauna didn't really care either way.

"Okay… but the attic? What do you think?" Jackie's brow furrowed as she scanned her face.

She looked at the ladder again, then she turned to check if anyone was nearby before stepping closer to Jackie. "Uh, well, it might get harder for you to go up and down it soon."

Jackie's face reddened, tears welling up.

Shauna's eyes widened, and she closed the distance, grabbing her shoulders. "What? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Jackie stepped forward and circled her arms around Shauna. "I'm gonna be so useless!" she wailed into her neck.

Shauna rolled her eyes, and patted her on the back with a sigh. "Um, it'll be okay."

"No, it won't! I won't even be able to go up a ladder soon!"

"Well, uh…" Shauna trailed off, trying to think. "I'll help you. You don't need to worry."

Jackie leaned back with a pout and a moist face. "Really?"

A fond smile grew on her face as she nodded, and said, "Yes."

Jackie rushed forward again, clutching her close. "Okay, thanks, Shauna."

She squeezed her tighter and wondered if this was what the next months of her life would be like.

---

The next day, Jackie woke up nauseous, and unlike usual, the feeling wouldn't go away. So, she'd been practically hanging off of Shauna, wanting her to comfort her.

There'd been a few moments where Shauna had gotten irritated, wanting a moment to breathe and be alone, but it was hard to stay mad for long when she took in how awful Jackie looked.

It was also nice to be the put together, strong one. Now, she was the one who had the power. It made comforting Jackie and taking care of her much less bitter than usual.

Jackie curled deeper into Shauna's side with a pained groan from where they sat together on a log. Shauna gripped her hip and rubbed it with her thumb, lost in thought.

"Is she okay?" Laura Lee asked with a worried frown as she sat down in front of them.

"She's been sick," Shauna said, and ignored how the arms draped around her shoulders tightened at the lie.

Laura Lee examined Jackie with soft eyes and an empathetic frown. "Do you guys know what it is?"

Jackie's legs leaned further into Shauna's so she could twist into her more, and Shauna rolled her eyes, but did nothing other than adjust her grip.

Laura Lee examined the interaction curiously. Shauna met her eye, wondering if Laura Lee would say anything. She smiled at Shauna. "Well, I hope she feels better. Let me know if I can help somehow."

The other girl seemed worried and helpful right now, so Shauna decided it might be a good time to work on one of the maybes.

"Laura Lee, I have a question for you about Jesus."

Jackie tried to pull away, and Shauna moved her right hand to her hair to comb her fingers through it while her left squeezed her thigh in warning.

Laura Lee's eyes lit up. "Of course! What would you like to know?"

"You're Jewish! What are you doing?!" Jackie hissed into her ear.

"What would Jesus say about my powers?"

"Shauna, you cannot be serious right now!" Jackie pinched her on the shoulder, but didn't move away again.

She noted Jackie continued to speak loud enough for only Shauna to hear. A small smirk touched her lips, but she hid it before Laura Lee could think it was aimed at her.

Laura Lee came out of her thoughts, and said, "Well, you said you kept only having feelings about things. Perhaps you're not able to have full visions as you are not—" she cut herself off, and Shauna tried not to snicker at her embarrassment. "Um, anyway, maybe this is still god's way of trying to communicate."

"Hm, would you be willing to help me with figuring this out more?" Shauna asked with a smile.

Jackie shifted her face closer to her neck.

Laura Lee bobbed her head up and down with a grin. "I'd love to help anyone who wants to learn to embrace god's light! Let me go get my bible!" She ran toward the cabin.

"Okay, tha—" Shauna's words cut off with a surprised yelp, as she felt something clamp onto her neck. The pain shifted into a sharp unexpected pleasure that went straight down,

making her release a throaty groan.

The sensation disappeared, and Jackie's head drew back with wide eyes.

Shauna pushed her arms off to shoot up to her feet, holding her neck. "Did you just bite me?!"

"What was that noise?" Jackie's jaw dropped.

Her face was flushed, and she felt like she was about to melt into a puddle. "Jackie, why did you do that?!" Shauna said with a squeak.

Jackie's mouth closed, and a smirk grew on her lips. Shauna was so out of sorts she couldn't even tap into the familiar anger.

"You kept ignoring me asking you what the hell you were doing," Jackie shrugged.

"So, you—"

"I found the bible!" Laura Lee said, skipping with glee.

Shauna looked between an excited Laura Lee and a smirking, intense Jackie. Her hand still held tightly to where she bit her neck, afraid Jackie would lean in to bite her again and Shauna would offer herself with a gasped 'please.'

All the new power she'd felt in their dynamic vanished.

She slumped back down on the log. Shauna had just been kidding herself. She'd never have anything over Jackie.

A few seconds passed in a strained silence.

"Hey, Laura Lee. Can you give us a minute?" Jackie said in that nice, perfect tone she used to get everyone to bend to her will.

"Oh! Of course, no problem."

Jackie sat down next to a still slumped over Shauna.

"I'm sorry, Shauna. I-I shouldn't have done that without asking."

Shauna blinked and turned her head, staring at her with wide eyes. Jackie looked down at her shoes with a frown and lowered brows.

"Uh, it's fine…" Shauna said, turning away with her cheeks flushing again.

Jackie grabbed her chin and turned it to her again. She worried her lip and stared at Shauna. distressed. "No, it's not." She looked down with a frown and muttered, "Fuck. What is wrong with me?"

Shauna examined her, surprised by how much she seemed to beat herself up over this.

"Well, um." Shauna's eyes moved away from Jackie's, her chin being held prevented her from moving her head, but for once, she didn't mind. "I didn't, uh, hate the feeling, so don't worry about it."

“Shauna…” her eyes whipped back to Jackie’s, seeing her hazel eyes had turned wide and wondering.

A commotion from the trees tore them apart, and they looked to see Travis coming back with an enormous smile, holding a wolf with Mari, who had an equally big smile. A happy Akilah and frowning Tai followed with one more. Misty and Van ended the procession, and both looked as excited as the others, but Van was holding her right arm gingerly.

Shauna leaped to her feet with wide eyes and a grin. “Holy shit, guys!”

She and Jackie shared a grin. Jackie wouldn’t be going hungry.

---

It turned out insisting Travis and the rifle went was the best thing Shauna could’ve done. Wolves had attacked them during the night, with Travis having taken first watch.

(‘As the only man here, I’ll take first watch,’ Mari had mocked when explaining what happened.)

The first one had leapt at him, and he’d raised his rifle and shot it right before it reached him. The second one with it had run before Travis could reload in time, but a third had snuck around and grabbed Van’s arm with its teeth. Luckily, Travis had been ready and shot that one before it could do much damage.

When Shauna first heard it from Mari, she’d thought it had to be exaggerated bullshit, but when everyone else there corroborated it, it was hard to argue.

They’d looked at Shauna in awe when telling her, and at first she’d thought it was only because she’d insisted on taking a hunter and the rifle, but then she realized they thought she’d somehow given Travis her blessing.

The extra attention she’d given him and the praise made them think Shauna favored him and that’s how he got the shot off when that wolf leapt at him.

It was so perfect for her and her plan, Shauna wondered if she had somehow blessed Travis.

But that’s dumb… right? That’s not possible? All these weird coincidences, and the praise, it’s just getting to Shauna’s head. That’s gotta be it…

---

Shauna cut into the first wolf and realized that it wasn’t just deer that made her heart pound and her breath hitch. The sight of wolf blood spilling to the forest floor made her eyes glaze over and mouth dry in just the same way.

She kept her head down as she sliced away, not wanting anyone to see her blown pupils and the tiny flush on her cheeks.

---

Jackie started sleeping terribly. Shauna could hear her at all hours of the night, waking her up by shifting around. It continued like that for three nights.

The day after the third, Jackie came storming out of the cabin, deep circles under her eyes, and a large frown on her face.

Shauna looked up at her, worry coursing through her at how determined and serious she looked. She opened her mouth to ask what was wrong when Jackie made it to where she was sitting. Then she turned and fell into Shauna's lap.

"Wha—Jackie! What are you doing?"

She slipped, and Shauna's hands zipped forward to grab Jackie so she didn't fall.

Shauna looked up to see everyone staring at them, either thoroughly amused or so bewildered they just had shock written on their face.

Jackie ignored all of this to clutch her arms around Shauna, curl into her neck, and close her eyes.

Shauna looked around wildly, hoping someone could explain to her what was happening, but all she got was her friends laughing at whatever expression must've been on her face.

She turned her head to Jackie as much as was possible. Then she opened her mouth, about to ask her, again, what the hell was going on when she realized there were soft breaths in her ear.

Shauna's face softened as she realized Jackie had fallen asleep. An ocean sized pool of affection filled inside her, and it washed away any of her aggravation with Jackie using her as a bed.

Most of the surrounding people seemed to realize what happened too, and there was a flicker of worry on their faces now instead of amusement.

They'd all seen how terrible Jackie had looked lately.

Shauna reached her hand up and softly ran her fingers along her hair, and everyone left them alone so Jackie could get her sleep.

---

That started a new routine every day afterward, and Shauna's harmless fondness had twisted in a way that was so typical for her.

It changed, so instead of innocent affection and softness, Shauna felt bubbling frustration and heat at Jackie being on top of her. Jackie would hide her face in Shauna's neck and breathe her in deep, and she'd have to stop herself from asking if Jackie wouldn't mind opening her mouth and biting into her again.

She would stop herself just in time, as she'd realize how weird that is to ask of her friend—and how loud her groan would be.

"Jax, you really need to tell them soon," Shauna muttered into her ear, and had to remind herself friends *do not* lick those, to finally pull her lips away.

She loosely put her arms around Jackie instead and carefully sharpened her knife on the other side of her legs.

“Nooooo,” she groaned, and Shauna rolled her eyes, exasperated with her and two seconds away from telling everyone herself.

Shauna knew her friend was playing it up for her and the crowd. Jackie had figured out that as long as she looked pathetic enough, no one would call her out on her bullshit.

Misty walked over, biting her lip. “Umm, Jackie. Do you want me to see if I can figure out what’s wrong? Maybe we can try to help you somehow?”

Jackie peeked her head out from Shauna’s shoulder with a smile. “No, I’m good. Shauna’s got me. Thanks, though!”

Shauna sighed, and Misty’s expression turned piteous as she caught her eye and walked away.

Jackie clutched her arms back around her shoulders and hummed. Shauna resisted the urge to do something that would make even more pretty noises come from her.

Laura Lee came bounding up to them with a grin. “Hey, Shauna. I remembered you wanted to know more about Jesus, and I thought this might be a good time since you don’t seem busy!”

“Shauna, aren’t you Jewish?” Tai said, looking between them incredulously.

“That’s what I said,” Jackie muttered to herself.

“Uh,” Shauna said stupidly.

“I don’t think it’s cool to try to convert people, Laura Lee,” Van said with a small disappointed frown.

Laura Lee’s shoulders dropped as her grin turned to a frown.

“Well—” Shauna started.

“Yeah, isn’t that like disrespectful to other religions, or something?” Nat said, spinning a stick between her fingers.

Laura Lee got teary, and she looked down at the ground with her arms crossed.

Shauna needed them all to shut the hell up. They were ruining this for her.

She stuck her knife into the log next to them and pushed Jackie’s arms away. She ignored her dramatic whine to pick Jackie up and place her on the log on her other side.

Standing, she reached Laura Lee’s side and scowled at them all. “I asked her about it. Leave her alone.”

“Why?” Tai said, bewildered.

Shauna groaned and grabbed Laura Lee’s arm to lead her away. “Because I did. Jesus fucking Christ.” Laura Lee gasped. “Shit! Sorry!”

Laura Lee was mumbling to herself as she dragged her toward the lake for a walk.

“I’m sorry everyone started yelling at you. You didn’t do anything wrong,” Shauna said and groaned, annoyed with them all.

Laura Lee looked down with a deep frown. “It’s okay. I’m used to it by now. Not everyone understands the fervor with which I practice.”

“Right… Right…”

How the hell was she supposed to spin this so Laura Lee thought Christianity was related to her cult?

“So, you told me how my feelings might be watered down visions, but what about the being saved from death thing?” Shauna paused, furrowing her brow. “I guess that’s like, Jesus, right?”

Laura Lee’s mouth opened in horror. “Shauna, are you trying to imply you’re Jesus?!”

Shauna eyes widened, and she raised her hands. “No, that’s not what I meant!”

Laura Lee’s gonna try to kill her for being blasphemous at this rate.

“That came out wrong! I’m sorry!”

Laura Lee’s horror slowly abated, and she nodded. “Okay, just please be more careful from now on.”

Shauna nodded. “Right, of course. I’m sorry. Um, let’s go check the nets, and you can help me figure this out some more.”

Laura Lee was still wary, but she agreed with a nod.

# 4. Father

The clearing was quiet as it turned to dusk. Evenings had started getting cooler, and this one was no different, making Shauna glad she'd begun wearing her flannels with the sleeves rolled down.

"Shauna."

She paused from where she was butchering up the wolf for that day's rations to look up and see Natalie briskly making her way over from the cabin.

Shauna nodded and raised a brow. "Natalie."

"I still think you're an idiot, but I need to talk to you," Natalie said, crossing her arms.

Shauna scoffed, and said, "I'm bus—"

"It's about Jackie."

Shauna froze, and her eyes moved up from where her head was bent to give Natalie a dark stare.

"Stop giving me that look. I'm trying to give you a heads up," Natalie said with a sigh and rolled eyes.

Shauna stared at her for a few more seconds and then sighed. She slammed her knife into the wooden table and said, "What?"

Natalie glanced around and stepped closer under Shauna's wary eye. "I overheard some girls asking why Jackie's getting bigger when we have no food." Shauna's jaw clenched. "Someone suggested she was hoarding food, but no one else believed it."

Rage exploded inside her with the power of a nuke. "Who?" she gritted out.

Natalie sighed, shook her head, and said, "You look like you're about to murder someone, so let's skip the who and get to how you're going to tell everyone Jackie's pregnant."

Shauna jolted forward and grabbed her collar. "What'd you say?!"

Natalie grabbed her wrist with wide eyes. "For fuck's sake, Shauna! I'm trying to help you here!"

Tai pulled them apart. "What are you doing?! Relax." She looked between them with wide eyes. "What the fuck is going on?"

Natalie scowled and shook her head. "Deal with your shit, Shauna," she said and stormed away.

Shauna glanced around and noticed she had the attention of the few people outside. Luckily, the only ones out there other than her and Tai were a wary-looking Van and a JV girl who was helping Tai gather fire wood. Natalie must've waited until fewer people were out to approach her.

Taissa looked at Shauna with wide eyes. “What the hell was that about?”

Shauna put her hands on the table and titled her head down while taking slow breaths. She needed to calm down and then talk to Jackie. This had gone on way too long already.

“Jackie’s pregnant.”

The chattering from the cabin drifted out as Van and the JV girl opened the door to go in. The door slammed shut, bringing back the oppressive quiet and leaving them alone.

Tai’s voice broke the silence with a sigh. “Yeah, I kinda figured, Shauna.”

She groaned. “Did anyone even believe me when I said she was just sick?”

Tai huffed out a laugh. “I believed you for a while, but it’s kinda hard to dismiss the physical signs.” She rolled her eyes. “And I’m not an idiot who thinks Jackie is magically hoarding enough food to gain weight.”

Shauna looked up at her large frown in place. “Please tell me that’s not actually what most people think.”

Tai crossed her arms and said, “No, just a couple of the dumber ones.” She sighed. “I think most people are keeping their thoughts and opinions to themselves because they’re afraid you’ll smite them or something.”

Shauna’s lips curled up.

“Stop looking so proud of yourself,” Tai scoffed.

Shauna’s expression dropped, and she sighed. “I should probably tell Jackie it’s time to tell everyone, huh?”

“You mean instead of telling them Jackie is throwing up blood?” Taissa glared at her. “Which fuck you for that, by the way, I was really worried about her.”

Shauna shrugged, unrepentant. “She really has been pretty messed up by this pregnancy, though.” Her brows furrowed. The niggling worry inside her had grown every morning she’d look over to see Jackie was worse than the day before.

Tai nodded slowly. “Has she been drinking enough of the pine needle tea? She might just need more vitamins.”

Shauna stared at her and resisted screaming. Vitamins! How did she forget vitamins?! She dropped her head into her hands and groaned. “Why didn’t I think of that?” She looked up at her desperately. “Tai, I can’t even take care of Jackie. How am I gonna take care of a baby?”

Tai looked at her incredulously. “Shauna, it’s not your baby! You don’t have to take care of it. Or Jackie, for that matter!”

The words, ‘you don’t have to take care of it or Jackie,’ spun on a loop through her mind. She dissected every word, hoping it’d make sense soon.

“Taissa, what the hell are you talking about? Of course I do!”

Tai gaped at her. “I—what are—” She gave up trying to speak and groaned, rubbing her temples.

Shauna rolled her eyes, not understanding what her problem was. “Whatever. Sorry I lied about the blood thing. Let me finish this so I can talk to Jackie.”

“Yeah, that seemed really sincere,” Tai said with a scoff.

Shauna sighed and looked up at her. “Thanks for having my back, Tai. Sorry I lied to you, but…” she trailed off, not sure what to say.

Tai rolled her eyes. “But it was to protect Jackie. Which, unfortunately, with you, explains everything.”

Her shoulders lifted into a shrug, though she tried to make sure she looked earnest. Other than Jackie, Tai was probably the only person out there Shauna cared about, so she wanted to make sure she hadn’t hurt her feelings by lying.

Tai stepped forward and squeezed her shoulder. “Dumbass.”

Shauna’s lips quirked, and she bent back over the wolf.

---

It was after everyone’s meager dinner that Shauna pulled Jackie aside and told her they needed to go for a walk. Under Tai and Natalie’s stares, they walked out of the cabin.

The lack of privacy out there was one of the most aggravating things to deal with. Any time you’d like to have more than a whispered conversation, you’d have to stray away from the cabin.

The moon led their way into the trees as the grass crunched and crackled beneath their shoes. It was chilly out that night, something Shauna noticed as Jackie kept rubbing her bare arms.

She scowled and took after her flannel to wrap it around her. “Why didn’t you grab your jacket?”

“You were practically pulling me out here, Shipman. I didn’t have a chance to.” Jackie rolled her eyes, but then wrapped the flannel tighter around herself with a small smile.

Shauna sighed. “Well, it’s important.”

“Clearly,” Jackie muttered as she stepped over a fallen branch.

Shauna hesitated and tried to figure out how to say this. Fuck it. “Jackie, some people know you’re pregnant and others are noticing something is up too. It’s time to tell them.”

Her foot stumbled on a rock, and Shauna shot forward to catch her before she could fall. Jackie’s breath was coming fast as she looked up at Shauna with wide eyes.

Shauna could see she was getting upset, and it was uncommon now, but she still knew what to do when Jackie went into a panic.

She grabbed Jackie’s hand and put it on her chest. Her palm went over hers, and she breathed in and out. “Breathe, Jax. It’s okay.”

Jackie stared at her, shaking. Her hazel eyes gleamed with tears, and her lips shook on every exhale. A few minutes passed like this before her breathing slowed and then the hand on Shauna's chest formed into a fist as it clutched onto her shirt.

She swallowed and asked with a croaking voice, "Who knows?"

"Tai and Natalie figured it out."

"But th-they can't know, Shauna! They can't. None of them can."

"Well, I don't think you were going to be able to hide it forever…"

Jackie dropped her head next to her fist on Shauna "s chest." I-I was hoping it would just… take care of itself."

Shauna reached up and combed her fingers through dirty blonde hair. "What do you mean?"

"We were barely eating. I'm not taking any vitamins or drinking that gross tea. I was hoping it'd—I don't know." Her voice dropped to a whisper, so low Shauna had to tilt her head closer to hear it. "Not be able to survive in me anymore."

She took a deep breath and didn't stop her ministrations. "Okay."

"Okay? You don't think I-I'm evil or something?" Jackie said with tears falling onto Shauna's front.

Shauna shook her head and then lifted Jackie's so she could see her face. "No, I'd have probably done something even more drastic in your place. You didn't do anything wrong, and fuck anyone who would say otherwise. Let's see how they'd deal with this."

Jackie let out a teary laugh and then moved forward to lay her head on Shauna's chest again. She muttered, "Thanks, Shipman."

Shauna squeezed her tighter and dragged her thumbs back and forth from where her hands laid.

"Do I really have to tell everyone, though?" Jackie said with a whine.

She let out a sharp laugh. "Yeah. They need to know. Some idiots are thinking you're hoarding food."

Jackie froze. "Oh my god. They think I'm fat?" she asked with horror and clutched an exasperated Shauna closer.

She sighed, gripping Jackie in return. Shauna opened her mouth, hesitated, and then said, "If you tell them you're pregnant, they'll stop thinking that."

Her friend leaned back and looked at her like she wanted to double check she wasn't trying to make a joke. Jackie's eyes rolled when she realized she was serious. "God, you're the worst," she said with a scoff as she put her head back on Shauna's chest and tried to nestle as close as possible.

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“I’m… um…” Jackie trailed off, looking pained.

“Why did you make us all gather for an announcement and then not *announce* anything?” Mari asked with rolled eyes.

Shauna glared at her, and Mari’s eyes darted down.

“Sorry,” Mari muttered.

Shauna had to bite the inside of her lip to resist smirking.

Jackie nudged her with her elbow. She looked pleading and nervous. Shauna’s head tilted, wondering if she was reading her right. Jackie bobbed her head quick and desperate.

She stepped forward, making sure Jackie was slightly behind her. “Jackie’s pregnant.”

There were some gasps and murmuring. Tai looked relieved and nodded to Shauna.

“Wait, so, are you like the father?” Melissa asked, her face scrunched up in thought.

“How would Shauna be the father?” Mari said, confused.

“Through her magical powers! Duh!” Melissa said with rolled eyes.

Shauna noticed that seemed to placate a lot of the girls around, as quite a few nodded with sudden understanding. Her eyes widened.

“Oh no,” Tai groaned.

“Yes! Yes, I am. I am the father.” she stepped forward and bobbed her head up and down. “I have used my powers to impregnate Jackie.”

She glanced over her shoulder to see Jackie looking at her with eyes so wide they were on the verge of popping out and a dropped jaw.

She turned back to the crowd to see quite a few of them were buying this. “So, because of that, um, we have to protect her, uh as the child is… uh.”

Natalie spoke up, and it looked like nothing had ever pained her more to do so. “The true heir to The Wilderness.”

Shauna nodded her head rapidly and pointed at her. “Yes, um, just like Natalie said.”

Excited chatter broke out. Most of the girls looked like they were happy to get something to put their hopes and dreams on. Coach Ben looked at everyone like he thought they were out of their minds. Tai looked at Shauna like she was a second from killing her. Natalie like she was completely done.

Shauna was too afraid to turn again and see what Jackie’s expression was.

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Jackie turned away from her when they went to sleep and wouldn’t acknowledge her.

Shauna stared at her back, wondering if it might’ve been a bad idea to tell everyone she was the father of Jackie’s baby.

But, now she knows Jackie would be protected, as almost everyone thinks she's… actually Shauna's not sure what they think Jackie is. She should look into that. Regardless, they think she's holding the heir to the wilderness in her womb now, so that goal is done.

And, if Shauna preferred, everyone thought she was the father?—second mother?—to Jackie's baby instead of Jeff, well, that was just a bonus and definitely not the main reason for doing that, because that would be fucking crazy.

She moved closer to Jackie and whispered, "Jackie? Are you awake?"

Her body shifted, so Shauna knew she was.

She edged closer and tried to whisper even lower so no one could hear her in the silence. "Are you mad?"

Jackie's head turned towards her with a glare so dark that for the first time in her life, Shauna felt wary of Jackie Taylor.

She grimaced and reached forward, eyes shifted to her hand, and Shauna retracted it under the heat of her stare.

Shauna stared at her for a few more seconds, and then her face shifted into a small scowl. She turned over to her back and stared up at the ceiling. "Fine. Whatever."

How the hell was Jackie gonna get this upset from Shauna protecting her? She's going above and beyond out here for Jackie, and all she gets in return is a cold shoulder.

Shauna scoffed to herself, and ignored Jackie shifting next to her at the noise. She probably thought Shauna wasn't good enough to be the father of her child.

She huffed again. Sorry, not everyone could be as picture perfect as you and the life you imagined for yourself, Jackie.

Her arms crossed over her chest and she started silently calling Jackie every name that came to mind.

Jackie turned and leaned over her with a glare. "Will you stop grumbling and moving around?!"

Shauna ignored the way Jackie had a hand planted next to her head and forced her glare to land behind her, so she knew Shauna was ignoring her.

A hand grabbed her face and squeezed her cheeks, wrenching her face towards Jackie's glare. "My feet are killing me. I have a headache. And you called yourself the father of my child without even asking me first. My patience with you isn't endless, Shauna."

Jackie was lucky her hand gripped Shauna's face so tight she wasn't able to talk, or she would've asked her how it felt to have someone make decisions for you without asking.

Her face grew closer. "If you want to be the father of the baby so bad, then grow up and stop acting like you're a victim," Jackie hissed.

Shauna's mouth tried to open to snap at her, and the fingers on her cheeks squeezed harder. A small noise escaped her, making her eyes go wide and her face flush. She was grateful

Jackie had a hold on her face, as she was pretty sure she would've whimpered much louder if not.

Jackie's eyes widened, and Shauna suddenly needed much more space between them.

She pushed the hand off her cheeks and turned away so her back was to a still hovering Jackie. "Goodnight," Shauna hissed.

"Uh, goodnight…" Jackie whispered distractedly, as she stopped hovering and moved back to her side.

---

"Morning, Tai." Shauna said as she sat next to her friend.

Tai turned to her with a bland expression and shook her head.

"What?" Shauna asked with a frown.

Tai sighed and went back to drinking whatever was in her cup.

Shauna stared at her, not understanding what her problem was.

"Hey, so should we like celebrate?" Van asked hesitantly. Tai turned her look onto her and Van ducked her head but continued, "I mean, it'd be fun…"

"You want to celebrate the conception of Shauna's fake baby?" Tai said with rolled eyes.

Mari glared at her. "It's not fake. Everyone can see Jackie's been getting bigger!"

Jackie, who'd been walking out of the cabin, covered her stomach with her arm and looked down.

Shauna leaped up and took a step toward her, glaring. "Watch it, Mari." Tai pulled her back to sit with a frown.

Mari's eyes widened, and she ducked her head. "Sorry, Shauna…"

The clearing had an awkward silence, the tension ruining what started as a pleasant morning.

"Umm… I-I still have some berries I saved that turned into booze…" Mari said as she looked at Shauna desperately.

"I don't give a shit what you wanna say we're celebrating for. If I get a drink out of it, I'm in," Natalie said with a shrug.

They all turned to Shauna to see what she'd say. She looked around, hesitant at the questioning stares.

Her eyes met Jackie's, already looking tired and resigned.

"Um…" she sighed and stood up. 'Jackie, it's uh, your baby. What do you think?' Shauna made it to her side and asked her, uncomfortable with the audience. "Would you want that?"

Jackie's face shifted through a multitude of expressions Shauna couldn't name before a small smile landed on her lips and her eyes softened. "It sounds like it could be fun." She

turned to everyone, and she looked much brighter. “Let’s have a party,” she said with a shrug.

There were some whoops from all around, and she turned back to Shauna. “Thank you.” Jackie said, squeezing her hand and walking past her.

---

Shauna handed Tai the axe to finish up the second half of logs and made her way toward the cabin.

“Everyone keeps giving me weird looks, Shauna,” Jackie said, walking up to her with a frown and crossed arms.

She looked around with a scowl. “Who?”

“If I wanted you to know, I would’ve told you,” Jackie huffed.

“Well, if you won’t tell me who it is, how am I supposed to make them stop?” Shauna sighed, frustrated.

“I didn’t ask you to make it stop, Shauna,” Jackie snapped.

Shauna’s brow furrowed. “Then why are you telling me about it?”

Jackie sighed out a large breath and walked away, making Shauna throw her hands up as she watched her go.

“Damn, who could’ve seen that you lying about being the father to her bastard child wouldn’t make her happy,” Natalie said as she came up from behind her.

Shauna scowled at her and said, “Whose side are you even on?”

“I didn’t realize there were sides.”

“Right now, there’s my side, or nothing. No one else is doing anything as a group.” Shauna crossed her arms. “I thought you didn’t believe I had powers, but you helped me last night. Why?”

Natalie groaned, looking at Shauna like she had a few screws knocked loose. “Do you hear yourself?”

Shauna raised a brow, waiting for an answer.

“This whole thing is so stupid, like incredibly fucking stupid.” Shauna opened her mouth with a glare. “But! I can see you’re *mostly* doing it to protect Jackie.”

Natalie rolled her eyes and continued, “Which is insane, by the fucking way, but at least I can get that better than you thinking you suddenly have powers.”

Shauna’s head tilted to the side, brow furrowing.

Well, if Natalie had a better idea than ‘start a cult to protect Jackie,’ then Shauna would love to hear it, but so far, this was the best solution to all her problems.

“As long as you don’t take this too far, I’ll help you,” Natalie said with an enormous sigh.

Shauna’s lips pursed in thought. “Huh. Why?”

“You’re being an asshole about it, but you’re also the only one attempting to organize out here.” Natalie smirked and continued, “And I can respect you for trying to protect your pregnant best friend from this pack of vultures, even if this is a ridiculous way to do it.”

Shauna nodded. “Alright, thanks Nat.” Her lips twitched, fighting against a smile. “Do you wanna be my high priestess?”

Natalie raised her hand to her head with a groan. “I can’t believe I’m agreeing to help you with this stupid shit.”

Shauna smirked and shrugged. Grabbing Natalie’s shoulder to pull her along. “C’mon, I gotta tell people to stop asking for my input on this party as if I care either way.”

Natalie stopped and looked at her with a groan. “Tell them to ask, Jackie, you idiot. She’d like that.”

“Oh!” Shauna nodded. “Yeah, good idea. I’ll do that.”

Natalie was turning out to be a great addition already.

## 5. Party

Shauna was writing in her journal on the cabin porch the day of the party, enjoying the cool morning breeze. She was using her journal for its intended purpose that day, just writing a few of her thoughts and observations.

Sometimes, she wrote a little too much and was a little too honest in them, but it was the only way she knew how to get her feelings out. She couldn't express them, not like most people could, not in ways healthy people could, so instead, she wrote.

Every letter became her cry, and every word her scream. And once she got done filling the page, Shauna felt like those too big emotions that were packed tight into her body would release and leave her feeling lighter.

And it worked. Until it didn't. Until the letters and words weren't enough to stop her body from overflowing. Then she would blow, destroying anything in her wake.

The sound of running feet met her ears and then an out of breath Misty was in front of her.

Shauna looked up at her with a furrowed brow. She'd kept putting off trying to get her to turn into a yes, not wanting to have to (be nice) to her.

Misty took a couple of gasps in and out and then said, "Jackie's in the attic, and she sounds really upset."

Shauna shot to her feet. "Um, thank you so much, Misty," she said as she rushed past. "You've been super helpful and done a great job."

That should be enough for now.

Shauna shoved her journal at a nearby Tai—trusting her to keep it safe for her—then ran to scramble up the ladder, and she knew what Misty meant now. She could hear tiny little sobs coming from above.

The attic was still unused as no one wanted to sleep where they found the dead body of the previous occupant, but it's obvious Jackie had been using it to get ready for their party in private.

It was a little eerie up there, and full of dust, but she ignored that for the moment as she ran to a crying Jackie in her unzipped dress.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Shauna said with a pant as she slid to a stop in front of her.

Jackie's arms flew around her as she cried into her shoulder.

Shauna rubbed her back, feeling icy panic shoot through her as Jackie ignored her questions and continued to cry. "Jackie, tell me what's wrong so I can fix it."

"You can't fix it!" Jackie cried harder. "Not unless you can go back in time and slap me for wanting to have sex with Jeff."

Shauna's mouth opened, and then she slammed it shut, just stopping herself from telling Jackie she wished she could.

She swallowed and tried again. "Okay… can you tell me what made you cry?"

Jackie pulled back from Shauna's arms and looked at her with a pathetic expression. Her face was drenched in tears, eyes red, and cheeks ruddy. "I can't zip up my dress," she said with a croak.

Shauna stared at her and processed those words. She thought about how she sprinted here in a panic, assuming something was wrong with Jackie.

She drew a deep breath, and she released it along with a little of her lingering irritation.

Shauna took a few moments to remember the years of meticulous diet and exercise that Jackie had done, the recent comments some Yellowjackets have made about Jackie's body, the fact Jackie was pregnant and scared and in the fucking wilderness with no one who knew what they were doing.

Most of the aggravation that had been remaining drained from her body.

Shauna raised her hands to Jackie's cheeks and wiped her tears with her thumbs. She nodded her head. "I'll help you, okay?"

Jackie's face slackened, and her tears slowed. "You will?" she asked with the slightest bit of shock.

Shauna's brow furrowed, not understanding her reaction. "Yeah, of course. Turn. Let me see."

She swallowed and nodded as Shauna dropped her hands so she could spin around.

The zipper on the green dress had only made it a few inches before getting stuck.

A large portion of Jackie's back was still on display along with her white bra and for a reason Shauna wouldn't be able to explain, she reached forward and let fingertips ghost along the soft skin over her spine.

Jackie released a sharp gasp at the touch, and Shauna ripped her fingers back. "Sorry!"

Her head turned to stare at Shauna with dark eyes, and Shauna felt flushed. "It's okay. I don't mind if you touch me," Jackie said.

Shauna's eyes widened and her heart started pounding so hard, she's sure the people downstairs could hear it.

Jackie faced forward again, and Shauna could think.

She swallowed and told herself Jackie just meant she didn't mind if Shauna's hand touched her back while zipping her up.

Her hand went forward, grabbing the zipper with her pointer and middle finger. The knuckle of her pointer finger moved over Jackie's back as she slowly zipped her up.

Jackie's breath hitched, and through her soft, smooth skin, Shauna could feel the beat of her heart pounding wildly the closer she got to the top of the dress.

The zipper got to the end of the track, and Shauna's hand lingered. "Better?" she whispered.

Jackie nodded her head, and didn't turn. She swallowed so harshly that Shauna could hear it, and her voice was uneven as she said, "Yes, thank you."

Shauna finally pulled her hand back and stepped away.

Her eyes lingered on Jackie's back, watching it move up and down with each breath. Hypnotized. The slight pant on her expelled breath was easy to hear, and Shauna had to stop herself from moving closer to make it louder for herself.

Jackie shifted in place, her head making an aborted movement to turn to her again, before changing her mind. "Shauna…?" she whispered.

Shauna coughed, coming out of her trance. "Uh, sorry. Lost in thought." She walked to the ladder. "I'll see you soon."

---

Shauna still had some time to kill before the party, and she really would like to get her thoughts in order. She decided the repetitive motion of sharpening her knife would help her.

It wasn't long into her task though, that she looked up as she heard the crunching of grass as Natalie walked up with Travis from the forest.

She put her knife down to deal with it later and stood with a sigh.

Natalie handed Shauna a piece of paper with scribbles on it. "Here."

"That's it?" Shauna asked with a frown.

Natalie rolled her eyes. "You saw the amount of game we got. It's not like there was much to list."

Shauna sighed as she read through all the places they'd had animal sightings in the past. Nat and Travis had promised to write an approximation of the miles and direction from camp by going back to where they found them. It'd taken a few days, but this was their ultimate efforts.

She sighed, nodded, and turned to Travis, a fake smile in place. "You did a great job. Travis! Nicely done."

He nodded, grinning, and walked away.

Natalie glared at her.

"What?" Shauna said, shrugging her shoulders.

"I told you to stop doing that to people. It's weird, you talk to them like they're a dog." She crossed her arms. "And it's really manipulative."

She furrowed her brows, confused. Was that not how to be nice to people?

Shauna let it go and hummed, looking back down at the list with a frown. "So they were nowhere even near each other?"

Natalie's narrowed eyes stared at her for a few seconds more, and then she shook her head and looked at the paper again. "No. They were all over the damn place."

"Was there water nearby any of them? Anything like that?" Shauna asked with pursed lips.

"Nope."

Shauna's aggravation rose like a teapot about to whistle. This wasn't getting her anywhere. It was just a waste of everyone's time.

"This is so fucking annoying!" Shauna threw the paper to the ground.

"Hey!" Natalie snapped with a glare. "I worked hard on that." She leaned down and picked it up, straightening out the wrinkles.

"You could have been focused on hunting, but I had you wandering around doing stupid shit!" Shauna pulled at her hair in agitation. "Why did I think that was a good idea?"

Natalie's eyes widened. "Damn, Shauna, relax. It's not a big deal. We still hunted at the same time."

Shauna was feeling so much pressure to make sure this stupid place was running smoothly and every wrong choice she made was just another reminder that leading was *hard* and not just people worshipping you all the time. Which sucks, because why the hell can't that be it?

Shauna felt those too big emotions packed into her body, boiling up more than ever. And the only one who helped her was Jackie, but even she didn't feel like enough recently.

Shauna breathed in and out, nodding at Natalie. "Right. You're right." She awkwardly patted Nat on the shoulder. "Great work. I'm gonna go get ready."

Natalie frowned at her, but nodded. "Alright, maybe a drink will do you good, Shauna."

She smiled and turned. "I hope so," she muttered.

---

When Shauna arrived at the clearing for the party, she saw it was decorated with all the scraps and little bits they could find. She could see they worked hard on it, and she couldn't help her smile as she saw what she knew were touches that Jackie would make.

Whatever Mari's booze was made of was so odorous she could smell it from across the clearing, and whatever her soup was made her stomach growl. The combination of smells was confusing, but the effort involved in both made a lot of Shauna's annoyance with the girl go away at least.

It was Travis who handed her an antler crown with a small smirk. She smiled back at him, amused at what felt like a private joke, and put it on her head. He nodded to someone nearby, and Shauna turned to see it was Javi. She hadn't even noticed him.

She smiled at him, and he grinned back before hitting a gong that someone had seen fit to bring out there. Shauna couldn't help but laugh at how silly it was, but that chuckle died in her throat as a made up and dressed Jackie walked through the streamers out at the entrance.

Shauna walked toward her, and she didn't want to imagine how stupid her expression probably looked right now.

"You look pretty, Jax," Shauna said as she made it to her side.

Jackie's cheeks turned pink and her hand went to her stomach. "Even though I—"

"Yes," Shauna interrupted. "Even if you were nine months pregnant and waddling around." A smirk slipped onto her lips and Jackie slapped her arm.

"You look pretty good yourself, Shipman." She frowned. "Well, except for the antlers. What's up with those?"

Either Jackie didn't remember that part of Travis' story, or she didn't think it was related. Regardless, Shauna would not bring it up and ruin the party.

"I think it's just for fun."

Jackie studied them for a moment with a frown, but then she shrugged.

Tai and Van came in as a couple, something Shauna hadn't been expecting, and an enormous grin grew on her face as she saw how happy her friend was. It grew even more as they turned to each other and kissed, causing her, along with everyone else, to clap like this was a cheesy romcom.

The party got started in earnest after that, which meant everyone went to go get the shitty food they had on hand, and stood around with no music except whatever the forest graced them with.

Shauna handed Jackie some of Mari's soup and sat next to her on a log.

"Ugh, I really wish I could drink some of that berry booze," Jackie grumbled while eating a bite of her soup.

Shauna took a bite of her own and made a face after she swallowed. It had a weird aftertaste.

She rolled her eyes at herself as she realized she was critiquing the soup that was probably made of nothing but leaves and dirt, like she was at a restaurant.

"I can go get you some if you want it, Jax," Shauna said with a shrug. She wouldn't pretend she wasn't curious about her answer.

Jackie's eyes widened as she looked at Shauna. "Uh, I mean, should I? Y'know with…" She glanced down at her stomach.

Shauna made sure her expression didn't show her feelings, trying not to influence her choice. "It's up to you."

Jackie's hand came up again. "I don't think I'd want to do something so… active towards getting rid of it." She looked up at Shauna and then back down again. "If that makes sense."

She nodded. "Yeah, don't worry. That makes sense."

Jackie gave her a small smile. "Thanks for offering though, Shipman."

“In my official capacity as your coach.” Shauna looked up to see Ben speaking up with a smile. “I most certainly cannot condone underage drinking. But, uh, that said, cheers.”

She, along with everyone else, raised their cups or bowls.

“Um,” Lottie spoke up, and she withered slightly with all the stares. She hadn’t been her best for weeks, so everyone had been leaving her alone. “Should we thank the baby and uh Jackie?”

Shauna’s eyebrows shot up, surprised Lottie was saying anything in favor of this. She realized she hadn’t even attempted to speak to her about her thoughts, assuming she wasn’t in a good enough place to care about this. A stupid thought to have, apparently.

Then, her words registered. She wanted to thank Jackie and the baby? What exactly did they do for this group so far?

Her hands formed into fists and she could feel nails tear into her skin as a familiar liquid heat of rage started traveling through her.

Fingers clasped around her own and softly rubbed her knuckles, soothing some of her ire away.

“Let’s just have a party and relax, guys! No need to thank anyone,” Jackie said with one of her easy grins. And it chafed a little that everyone listened to her so easily, nodding and smiling and going back to the party, but it mostly just cooled the rest of her anger.

Her hand flipped over and she clasped their fingers together and squeezed. Jackie squeezed back, and Shauna smiled one of her very rare soft smiles that she reserved for her.

The party went on normally for long enough, but at one point everything started looking odd and abstract to Shauna. Like a Picasso someone drew from memory and made even more weird looking. It was hard to remember much from there. Time stopped seeming linear.

Shauna wondered if it was her new magical powers.

---

She’s not sure how long it’s been since she ate that soup, but now Shauna felt really giggly. She had no idea why. Shauna just wanted to laugh so bad.

A lot of the others seemed in agreement as she saw Natalie lying on top of Travis as they laughed at something. Coach Ben was passed out by a tree, and Misty was a few feet in front of him, also passed out where it looked like she was trying to crawl to him.

Mari was nearby, laughing about Misty being a worm. Shauna turned to look again, and she was right. Misty did kinda look like a worm.

She started laughing again, because this was possibly the funniest clearing in the world right now.

Shauna saw some of the girls surrounding Jackie, trying to press their ears to her stomach, and she wasn’t so amused anymore. Her lips lifted into a scowl as her nails pressed into her palms. Who the hell did they think they were?

She made her way over and pushed someone, who was very blurry—did Shauna need glasses?—out of the way so she could put her ear to Jackie's stomach.

'Cause that was her baby, and more importantly, that was her Jackie. And they weren't allowed to touch her.

She laid her head there and waited, but nothing happened. There wasn't a kick like she was promised. Shauna wondered if it was dead. Dead like Jackie wanted. Dead like Shauna wanted too. Because that wasn't *really* her baby, like she lied and said it was. It was Jeff's, and she hated that Jackie had a piece of anyone inside her that wasn't Shauna.

Shauna lifted her head and looked up at Jackie from her knees, wrapping her arms around thighs so she could have Jackie right where she wanted her. Her face was pressed into her stomach and Shauna could smell the sweat, dirt, and scent of pure Jackie. She had to resist crawling under her dress and trying to lick the scent off of her skin. Shauna wanted to know if it would taste as good on her tongue as the aroma did to her nose.

Jackie looked down at her. Her wild hair, flushing face, and dark hooded eyes tilting down at her like Shauna was her supplicant, and she thought Jackie looked like divinity.

She should ask if Jackie would like to pretend to have magic and become a cult leader. Shauna thought it would fit her well, considering she already had the heavenly glow.

A hand came to her chin and pulled her up to stand. And Jackie was there, and she wasn't blurry at all, and that made Shauna giggle again.

Jackie frowned at her and covered her lips with her hand. "Stopppp. You're not supposed to laugh at me! You have to be nice to me."

Shauna licked Jackie's hand, and she removed it with an annoyed groan. "Why?" Shauna asked.

Arms wrapped around her shoulders, and Jackie pouted at her. "Because you love me, and said you're the father of my child, so you have to be nice to me all the time now."

"I'm always nice to you, Jax," Shauna said, while leaning in.

"Shauna!" A hand jerked her back and shook her. Van appeared in front of her with wide eyes. "Shauna, what do we do?!"

Her eyes blinked and Jackie started rubbing her cheek against Shauna's with a small hum. The noise buzzed pleasantly in her ear along with the warm little breaths Jackie made, distracting her and causing her to grin. Van pulled on her arm again. She blinked.

Shauna lightly pushed Jackie's head away, and ignored the whine as she yelled, "As long as Jackie is protected, everything will be okay!" Her cheek started rubbing against Shauna's again, so she reached up and covered Jackie's ears before screaming, "Other than that, do whatever the fuck you want! Who gives a shit?!"

The whole clearing cheered, and Shauna felt like a god.

Jackie's eyes looked bright and big as she nodded. "You're such a good father husband wife mother." She grabbed Shauna's hand and started dragging Shauna away. Jackie's palm

felt so soft and delicate in her hand. She didn't know how such a dainty thing had the ability to reach into her chest and tear her heart out so often.

Shauna wasn't sure where they were going, but Jackie looked pretty and also kinda like she wanted to eat Shauna alive. And that sounded kinda awesome to her, so she'll follow Jackie and do whatever she wanted because she always did, and also Jackie was so pretty.

---

The night came in flashes after that.

She remembered a tongue entering her mouth, while a hand clutched her jaw hard enough to leave bruises.

Something entering Shauna below and making her moan and cry out in ways she had never experienced before while there was a sharp bite on her neck that rolled between overwhelming pain and pleasure. A feeling of wonder that the sharp teeth at her throat could tear a chunk out of her and she'd let it.

Muttering and whining to someone about how hungry she was, and then being pushed down and down and licking and sucking like Shauna could actually get sustenance that way. And then being pulled up by the hair after her belly stayed empty, but the cries she heard filled her well enough, regardless.

Flashes of soft hazel as she cooed to a slightly distended stomach and asked if they wanted to raise a boy or a girl with her.

That same stomach under her hand as she curled around a body and passed out sometime in the night.

# 6. Bear

Shauna woke with a groan and the sun in her eyes. Who put more windows in the cabin?

She blinked and blinked again as she noticed the dirty blonde hair in front of her. She stiffened, but then Shauna smelled the familiar smell that was Jackie and relaxed. One of them must have rolled over to the other in the night. They'd cuddled plenty of times.

Her eyes dropped closed, and she gripped Jackie tighter to bring her closer, and then her eyes widened, because they'd cuddled plenty of times, but never naked.

Shauna's hand sprang from Jackie's soft skin and pushed herself away from her naked back. Her eyes roamed Jackie's form once, because Shauna had terrible self control. She flicked them away and kept her head turned so she wouldn't do that to her unconscious best friend again.

Dressing quickly, she turned back and was very careful at staring only at honey blonde hair. She tried to decide if she should wake her or leave her there and sneak away. But then she remembered this was a pregnant, naked girl in the middle of the woods, and she realized what an asshole she was for even having to question what she should do.

She sat beside her and crept her arm toward Jackie to grab her shoulder lightly and shake her.

A small little moan went out as she woke up, and Shauna remembered a couple of similar ones from last night. And yeah, it was not the time for this. Jackie needed to be inside, not out naked on a cool, damp morning.

She shook her again, and Jackie grumbled, turning from her side to her front. Shauna whipped her head away and cried out.

A piercing spike of agony went out from her neck on her left side, and her hand reached for it before hovering over it, too afraid to touch it.

Jackie jolted up next to her. Hair wild and eyes unfocused. She looked around and then turned to where Shauna sat, face twisted in pain. Her eyes cleared, and she reached forward, grabbing Shauna's shoulder. "What?! What's wrong?"

Shauna kept her eyes upward and her jaw clamped shut, not wanting to make the same mistake again. A hand shook her shoulder, and Jackie asked her again, so with a sigh, she moved her hand from her neck.

A loud gasp went out, and Jackie moved closer. "Fuck! Shauna, what happened to your neck?"

"Um, I can't see it. So…" Shauna said, still staring any direction that didn't include a very nude Jackie Taylor.

"Oh. Uh, well, it's a super deep bite wound. It bled down to your shoulder." Her hand reached up and passed her fingers over it, making Shauna shudder. "It looks like someone

was trying to tear your throat out," she muttered.

Shauna swallowed, and glanced at her, and then away when she saw a bare shoulder. "Um, Jackie."

"Yeah," she said, still inspecting Shauna's neck with dark eyes.

"Are you aware you're naked?"

"Hmm, no," Jackie said distractedly. The hand jolted away from her. "Wait, what?!"

Shauna kept her head turned away and listened to the shuffling of Jackie putting her clothes back on.

"Why was I naked?!"

"Uh…" Shauna's brow furrowed, wondering what to say here.

"Shauna!"

"How much do you remember from last night?" Shauna asked in as delicate a tone as possible.

"Last night…" she trailed off. "Oh. Oh! Oh…"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's what you said last night, too." Shauna slapped a hand over her mouth. She had not meant to say that out loud.

Jackie groaned, and Shauna made sure not to say that she also made that noise last night. "Can you please just help me zip up my dress so we can get out of these damn woods?"

She cautiously turned, sighing in relief—and a little disappointment—when she saw Jackie dressed, just needing Shauna to zip her up.

Shauna walked over and released a large breath.

Jackie's head twisted toward her. "What is it?"

The skin on Jackie's back had multiple sets of scratches. They would heal, and weren't that deep. If anything, Shauna had been gentle. It was just a surprise to see with no warning.

"There's a bunch of scratches on your back. I'm sorry," she mumbled.

Jackie turned her head forward, and Shauna watched her ears turn red. "Oh."

"Um, uh, let's go back to the cabin. I don't think it's far."

"Okay." Jackie nodded and avoided looking at Shauna. And she hoped this didn't become a big thing.

---

They walked into cabin clearing to see everyone there looked like they'd been hit by a truck.

"You guys look terrible," Natalie said.

“Your hair is sticking up in every direction possible,” Jackie said with rolled eyes.

Natalie grumbled something to herself and then went silent.

“Shauna, what’s going on with your neck?” Mari asked.

Her cheeks reddened.

Tai looked at it from close by and laughed. “Damn, Jackie. We all know she’s yours. You didn’t have to mark her, too.”

Jackie flushed, and she turned to go inside with quick steps.

Shauna glared at Tai, who only rolled her eyes at her in return.

“So anyone have a clue what the hell happened last night?” Van asked.

“Shrooms,” Natalie said around a yawn.

“Okay, yeah. That makes sense,” Van muttered with a frown.

“Oh, shit. The broth,” Taissa said.

If Shauna was being honest, she didn’t care about this. She cared about making sure Jackie wasn’t freaking out in there.

She stood and made her way around the commotion about Misty drugging them instead of Ben, which in her opinion was a terrible plan and made her already minuscule respect for her lower even further.

Shauna went to continue toward the cabin, but a shine to her right caught her attention.

It was her knife, still sitting there on the log, perfect and waiting. She groaned to herself when she saw it. It was their only knife, and she decided to leave it outside all night.

She huffed at her own stupidity and ignored the ongoing argument still going on behind her. She made her way to the log, picked it up, and examined it carefully.

It was *her* knife, and she felt stupidly protective of it sometimes—that was why her own carelessness chafed. She shook her head, and put her thumb to its sharp pointed tip, testing it like one time outside overnight was going to make them safety scissors.

“Shauna!” Jackie screamed, cutting through her thoughts as easily as the still sharp knife in her hand.

She jumped and looked to where the yell came from, only to see everyone staring at her with wide eyes from closer to the cabin porch.

Her eyes followed theirs and that’s when she realized she’s apparently deaf because there was a bear walking up to her while she was too busy playing with her knife.

She looked at the bear, and then her knife, and wondered if she threw it and ran. Would it do anything except make it angry? Were brown bears the one you should lie down and play dead with or was that black bears?

“Someone, go get the rifle,” Ben said, as calm as possible.

Shauna swallowed and looked into the bear's eyes, and then she noticed something. They looked like the deer's. The one that almost ran her over. She started following the same pattern—of walking toward the threat instead of away as it drew closer in return.

There was nothing half as horrific in this bear as there was that monstrous deer, but that same look of wrongness was in this bear's gaze.

She stepped forward and ignored the panic behind her, because she needed to know. She needed to understand what the hell was up with these animals.

And maybe she was drinking a little bit of her own kool-aid, but Shauna had the oddest feeling that this bear wasn't there to hurt her. It felt like… a gift? Or maybe a curse? She wasn't sure yet.

She stepped forward again, and her neck started to bleed sluggishly for no discernible reason, and Natalie cried out behind her, "Shauna, why the fuck do you keep standing in front of things I need to shoot?!"

And through all of that, she stared into the bear's eyes and realized that the look she saw now and the look she saw weeks ago with that deer wasn't fury—it was pain and fear.

This *thing*—because that's what it was, a thing—wanted someone to kill it. To put it out of its misery.

It fell and flopped to its side with a pained groan, and Shauna lifted her knife and stabbed it in the head. Quick and easy and relatively painless.

But there wasn't her usual thrill as it died and bled onto the ground, and she wondered if it was because this wasn't an animal, but a *thing*.

---

Shauna spent the rest of the day in solitude, preparing the bear, wanting to gather her thoughts. Everyone seemed fit to give it to her. Even Jackie, and Shauna didn't pretend that didn't burn.

She'd run away as soon as they got back to the cabin, and then ignored Shauna since. Jackie had looked her over after the bear, as if something happened during one of her blinks, but past that she hadn't acknowledged her.

It made dinner that night start off with her already in a foul mood—not that anyone else could tell. She was just as sullen as was expected, and sometimes that broodiness helped her, as it meant no one questioned her when it was a notch worse than usual.

She'd hoped Jackie would at least say something to her when she walked in for dinner, but so far, Jackie sat as far away as possible and didn't say a word to her.

"Shauna, last night you said that as long as Jackie was safe, everything else would be okay. How did you know?" Van asked with wide eyes as she looked between an uncomfortable Jackie and gloomy Shauna sitting on opposite sides of the room.

She shrugged and barely resisted rolling her eyes. "I just did."

Tai gave her a dirty look. “Shauna doesn’t seem to understand that you should step away from wild animals, not towards them. She got lucky this one didn’t kill her.”

Shauna scowled and opened her mouth.

“Tai’s right, Shauna. What was that?! It could’ve killed you!” Jackie said, glaring.

Shauna gritted her teeth. Now she wanted to acknowledge her? “Can you guys not gang up on me and just eat the damn food that I spent all day butchering?”

“Great, mommy and daddy are fighting again,” someone snidely muttered.

Shauna looked around with a glare, trying to see who it was, but it was hard to tell with how bunched up everyone was.

“Wait,” Van interrupted. “Should we maybe… say something? Like, like thanks or grace or… whatever?” She looked down awkwardly.

Shauna shrugged, not caring either way if they prayed to that weird bear or not.

“I am not praying to the dirt gods,” Tai snapped.

“No,” Van said, shaking her head as she nervously kept her eyes down. “I meant… to Jackie and the baby.”

Shauna’s face dropped. What?

Mari nodded slowly. “Yeah, it’s like Shauna said right, as long as Jackie is safe, everything would work out…”

She felt her body stiffen and shake. The feeling of a thousand suns exploding inside. A white hot fury unlike anything Shauna had ever experienced before filling her body.

Shauna started this entire cult for Jackie. To protect Jackie. And she still took it from her! And she didn’t even have to try!

She created a whole new religion—basically in her honor—and Jackie couldn’t just let her have it. She took it away and made it hers. And made everyone love her more than Shauna! And fuck fuCK FUCK SHE HATED HER SO MUCH!

Shauna clenched her fists around her bowl, shaking with that uncontrollable rage she always built brick by brick with her own raw, callused fingertips.

“It’s not my baby.” Shauna said, clear and toneless.

“What?” Melissa asked, bewildered.

Shauna leapt to her feet and slammed her bowl down on the table next to a wide eyed Tai. There was a thick tension in the air as Shauna felt eyes staring into her from all directions.

“It’s not my fucking baby! Jackie’s bastard child is Jeff’s.” She turned to Melissa and whatever look was on her face made her lean back, wary. “I lied to you. I lied to everyone about the baby thing because I’m an idiot who always tries to put Jackie first and just wanted to protect her!”

A few still looked skeptical on that reasoning, not understanding that would be enough, but fine screw it, if Shauna's gonna blow it up, she's gonna blow it up right.

"And because I felt guilty." They looked curious, and less wary, and Shauna knew she had them. "I fucked Jeff. Her boyfriend, and I didn't tell her I was going to Brown."

The room was silent. She scanned those around her. There was some lingering interest, but yeah, most of these girls didn't give a shit about high school drama right now beyond it making more sense to them why Shauna would go to such extremes.

"So yeah." She shook her head. Irritated she had to explain herself, but knowing it needed to be done so she didn't lose anyone. "I'm sorry I lied, but I'm always stupid for Jackie."

Tai grabbed her arm with a stern look. "Shauna, sit down."

"Fuck off!" She ripped her arm from her grip.

She still wouldn't look at Jackie. Shauna's not sure if she'd kiss or kill her right now, but either way, she would not lose control of this group, so she needed to spin this where they still loved Shauna most.

Not Jackie, who didn't do a thing except fuck Jeff and then sew here for two days before coming up with convenient excuses to use her fake illness as a shield to get out of it. Not her, who did nothing to deserve this after Shauna put in all the effort in to make this whole thing!

She breathed heavily and looked up with a dark stare to see wary looks and betrayal on some faces around her. Shauna would salvage this. She would.

"I was going to let it go on, but I couldn't sit back and listen to you pray to Jackie when it was The Wilderness who gave us this gift."

A few of the upset stares lit up with realization and relief.

"Not when our lives are at stake." Even more people nodded at this, and Shauna had this. She could do this. "This is more important than just protecting one person."

She could keep her worshippers and they'd stop thinking it was Jackie who helped them, Jackie who provided for them, or did any of the work. When it was all Shauna, Shauna, Shauna.

Shauna stared around at her fellow Yellowjackets, but no one would meet her eyes anymore. They were all waiting, waiting to see what she'd say, what she'd do, what she'd command. It was exactly what she wanted.

The giant sized lump in her throat that tasted bitter with its tinges of self hatred was hard to swallow down, but Shauna managed. Her shoulders were shaking as she barked out, "Join hands."

Hands clasped together obediently, and she finally inched her face to her right—because Shauna was pathetic—and she saw Jackie staring at her with tear soaked cheeks, eyes filled with betrayal, and wobbling chapped lips. A face full of pain unlike anything else she'd seen from her before.

She looked down as she noticed the grip on her left was excruciatingly tight. Tai looked back at her with an angry, disappointed glare, but Shauna didn't have time for this. She needed to thank the dirt gods, as Tai put it earlier.

"For this gift from the wilderness, we give our thanks…" As they said the prayer, she studied everyone, careful to not mess this up once again, and assume.

Shauna was pretty sure everyone in her yes list looked pious and faithful as they followed along—except Natalie, who looked like she thought Shauna was the dumbest person she'd ever met, but Natalie didn't matter right now.

She'd still need to double check and make sure. And maybe make sure again. And maybe even again after that. Because she was the leader. She was in control, and it was her responsibility.

Shauna was here to thank the goddamn woods, be worshipped, and, yes, still get Jackie and her little bastard spawn out of here, but not at the cost of hearing everyone worship her in *Shauna's* place.

When they finished, she tore her hand from Tai's grip and went to sit down.

"Jackie didn't say it," Misty said, and she whipped around at the sound of someone saying Jackie's name. Misty looked at her with wide, panicked, pleading eyes.

Shauna glanced at Jackie, who was shaking and had her head tilted down over her untouched bowl of food. Her knuckles white as she clutched it to her letterman jacket. Eyes drifted up and looked at Shauna with betrayal and pain and brokenness and a small amount of fear—making Shauna feel sick.

But even then, there was no hate. None of the hate that Shauna knew filled her own gaze. Jackie's eyes were more chilling without it.

She felt regret already eating at her heart and she couldn't hold Jackie's eye anymore as she looked away with a shaking body—less from rage and more from the sudden need to cry.

Shauna wanted to ask her how it felt to be on the other side for once. She wanted to hug her close and say she was sorry and didn't mean it. She wanted to put her fingers inside her and make her forget everyone's name but Shauna's.

She didn't do any of that, though.

Instead, she looked at the team's equipment manager with a dead stare that made the other girl's natural nervousness increase and said, "Shut the fuck up, Misty."

Shauna sat back down beneath the weighted silence and stares and ate her food.

# 7. Shed

The meat shed was warmer than outside, but Shauna still wouldn't call it pleasant. She couldn't complain about it too much though, as it was also one of the few private places you could find now.

A month ago, when they'd first got the blessing of the bear and the snow fell that same night, they'd all agreed the meat needed to be stored to stave off predators. Thus, the meat shed. And then, when it was done, it became Shauna's sanctuary.

Shauna had become as possessive of the place as she had anything else she saw as hers. Every Yellowjacket knew you didn't bother her or walk around in there without her permission first.

The shed door opened and slammed closed behind Shauna as she was working on getting the rations for dinner.

Though, as usual, there was one person who didn't care about what Shauna wanted. They were happy to stomp around as much as they wished, with or without her permission.

Shauna turned her head and scowled. "Why the fuck are you out here, Jackie? It's freezing."

Jackie stayed silent. She just stared at her and walked closer, her pregnant belly on display —begrudgingly wearing Shauna's baggy clothes because they were the only ones big enough to fit.

Shauna rolled her eyes and turned back to the bear. "You shouldn't be out here," she grumbled. "Especially if you're here to just stare at me like a creep."

The footsteps came closer, and she breathed out through her nose. Shauna stuck her knife into what remained of the bear's carcass. She swallowed and stared at it, waiting.

A hand gripped her flannel before pulling and shoving her against the wall. Lips quickly followed and Shauna gasped into the kiss, something Jackie took advantage of to stick her tongue in her mouth.

Shauna pulled back and rolled her eyes. "Now?"

Jackie gave her a dark glare and then bit her lip so hard a drop of blood fell to the floor. Shauna's breath caught—the pain becoming pleasure and warming her from the inside.

"Now," Jackie sneered

Shauna twisted them around and glanced down at the cold ground, hesitating. She looked back up into Jackie's eyes to see them unsympathetic and harsh.

She sighed and dropped down, the chill going through her pants and nipping at her legs.

Shauna reached up and pulled Jackie's pants down to her thighs, but there was none of the passion or sensuality she vaguely remembered from their first time.

Jackie reached forward and time slowed, as it always did when this part happened. Her hand found the heart necklace Shauna's worn since Jackie put it on her for good luck.

She hadn't asked for it back, and Shauna refused to do so until Jackie did. Her thumb rubbed the heart, the rest of her fingers ghosting across the front of Shauna's throat.

Then, they continued up, dragging newly callused fingers on her skin, every inch making Shauna's heart faster, and her body warmer.

They reached the side of Shauna's neck, and landed on the healed bite scar she left there. Jackie stroked it gentle, soft, loving.

Shauna's shoulders dropped as they always did when Jackie touched her mark—the one no one could ever take away—and she stared up at Jackie like a zealot. She ignored Shauna to stroke her skin, giving her the only affection she'd been willing to in weeks.

Jackie's hand stilled and stayed in place, as it always did during these encounters.

The soft expression disappeared. Jackie grabbed her hair in a tight fist, pulling her forward, and Shauna went willingly under her impatient glare.

---

Jackie left the meat shed, and Shauna finally finished preparing that night's dinner. She kept her mind focused on survival for once, trying to get the tune of *Jackie, Jackie, Jackie* out of her head so she could have a moment of peace.

When she walked inside with their meager amount, she handed it to Mari, who grumbled about how little there was. Shauna sat and took off her outer clothes, and Tai walked up to her with a sigh.

She leaned in closer and muttered, "I don't care what the hell you two are doing out there, but it's annoying everyone how long you always take because of it."

Shauna looked at her deadpan. "I don't know what you're talking about. We're just doing lamaze exercises."

"Well, start doing them after you bring us the food so everyone doesn't kill each other."

Shauna went back to what she was doing, and Tai rolled her eyes, walking back to Van.

"Shauna." Natalie waved her over into Coach Ben's room.

Natalie walked over to a waiting Ben, and they both watched as she put another piece of the map up. She then looked at the paper she wrote for Shauna all those weeks ago and scribbled a small square on the new piece of the map.

"What's that one?" Ben asked.

"A hare," Natalie said with a sigh. "Caught it there a while ago."

Shauna leaned closer to study the map. "Is that all of them?"

"Four more to go," Natalie said while marking off the hare.

“Marking past hunts was a great idea. It’ll help you and Travis focus on specific areas more,” Ben muttered while looking over the map.

Natalie smirked and rose a brow at her. “Look at that, Shauna. And you wanted to throw it away during your tantrum.”

She scowled and said, “I’m the one who told you to get it.”

“And then almost threw it away during a tantrum. Exactly.”

Shauna waved her off. “Fine. Whatever.” She narrowed her eyes at the map. “Any other information that would be helpful?”

Ben stared at it, and they let him think.

Shauna saw movement out of the corner of her eye and felt irritation balloon inside her as she noticed Jackie and Lottie talking while they waited for scraps.

They’d gotten a lot friendlier since Lottie started helping Akilah and Jackie with sewing—something invaluable in the colder weather. Personally, Shauna would rather freeze to death if it meant they’d stop laughing and talking all the time.

When Akilah was with them, it wasn’t so bad. But when it’s just them two. God, the two of them together. Thick as thieves. Especially since Laura Lee has gotten so much more involved in helping Shauna, and Lottie became more uncomfortable with it. It was so fuc—

“Shauna!” Natalie said, pulling her away from the door so she couldn’t look out. “Ben said he thought of something.”

She shook her head and turned back to the map.

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They left the room a few minutes later, but didn’t make it far before being stopped by Travis. “Anything?”

“Can you see if you remember any times of day? Ben wants to keep track of that next,” Shauna sighed.

Travis nodded and went inside.

Natalie scowled at her.

“I didn’t treat him like a dog. Why are you glaring at me?” Shauna said with an eye roll.

“He still listens to you more than he does me,” Natalie said, frowning as they sat on the bench at the front of the cabin.

Shauna grimaced. “Uh, don’t worry. You can have him, Natalie.”

She elbowed Shauna in the ribs. And she cried out, more out of surprise than pain.

The chatter silenced. They all turned to look at Shauna, waiting to see if she’d do something. She examined them, curious about how tense some of them got from one pained exhale from her.

Her eyes drifted in the direction she knew it shouldn't and saw Jackie looking back with a dark glare. She gritted her teeth and snapped her eyes away.

"Relax guys. We're just messing around," Shauna said with an uncomfortable smile.

Natalie shook her head and leaned back in her seat. "You need to train your dogs better, Shauna."

"You realize that makes you a dog too, right?" Shauna said with rolled eyes.

Natalie smiled in a way that was anything but nice. "Oh no, I'm the coyote who snuck in and is two seconds away from biting you if you don't reel this shit in." She waved her hand forward to indicate her still stiff followers.

She sighed, exhausted. "Okay, Nat. Sure. Whatever, you can be a coyote."

Natalie huffed and glared at her. "You don't listen to a goddamn word anyone says except Jackie. And she doesn't even wanna fucking talk to you."

Shauna threw her hands up in the air. "Fine. Anything else? Are we done?"

Natalie released a noise from the back of her throat and stomped away.

"What the fuck was she even talking about?" Shauna muttered to herself.

Laura Lee sat down where Nat just vacated and hummed. "She thinks some followers of The Church of the Holy Wilderness are getting a little too aggressive with dissenters or people hostile toward you."

The name was a compromise, and every day she heard it reminded Shauna how stupid it was, but it made Laura Lee happy. So far, she'd been irreplaceable in giving Shauna unintentional tips on indoctrination.

Shauna hummed and looked around. "Why does she think that?"

"There's a been a few incidents," Laura Lee said while biting her lip.

She turned to her with narrowed eyes. "What do you mean?"

"No one has messed with Jackie," Laura Lee said while quickly shaking her head. "They're not crazy. We all remember what you said."

Shauna had been afraid they'd take being duped out on Jackie. So, only a day after that dinner, she told them if anyone tried anything, she'd bleed them out like an animal and cook them instead.

She'd been worried they'd ignore her, but whatever look she had in her eyes when threatening them had been enough. She was lucky being an impulsive hothead hadn't made this whole thing a waste of time.

Her shoulders relaxed. "Then what do you mean?"

"Lottie." Her fingers fiddled together. "I was going to speak to you about it today, anyway."

She frowned and her eyes locked onto Lottie's small smile and soft eyes as she spoke to Jackie. Shauna swallowed. "What's going on?"

"Someone thinks it's funny to tell her there's nothing there when she's in the middle of doing something, or tell her she's seeing things. Things like that. It's making her nervous." She shook, getting upset. "It-it's very cruel, Shauna, and I don't like it or want to be a part of it." Laura Lee said with wide, nervous eyes.

"Okay…" Shauna frowned. "I'll deal with it. Don't worry."

Lottie being near Jackie was pissing Shauna off, but that didn't mean she wanted her to be tortured by someone using whatever mental health issue she had going on.

Laura Lee's shoulders dropped, and she gave her a smile, eyes brightening with the now familiar sight of her worship.

Shauna nodded to her, and then walked over to where Lottie and Jackie sat. The smile on Jackie's face slipped into a scowl.

Shauna ignored her, turning to Lottie, and Jackie's scowl deepened further.

"Lottie, do you have a second?" Shauna asked.

She looked between Jackie and Shauna awkwardly.

"What's the matter? Can't say it in front of me?" Jackie asked with a raised brow.

Shauna gritted her teeth and waited for Lottie.

"Uh, you can just say whatever it is here, Shauna. It's fine." Lottie said, fidgeting in her seat.

Shauna leaned closer to Lottie, so close none of the surrounding people could overhear, and also maybe so Jackie couldn't either, knowing it'd piss her off. "Is someone from my group messing with you?"

Lottie's lips lowered to a frown, staring down at her hands.

"Uh…" Lottie's eyes darted over Shauna's shoulder, and she knew she was looking at a fuming Jackie.

"Just nod if it's true, and I'll figure out the rest."

Lottie's eyes flickered around hesitantly. She glanced at Shauna one more time and nodded.

Her hand reached forward to rest on Lottie's shoulder when Jackie caught her wrist and squeezed it.

"You got whatever it was you wanted. Now, get out of here, Shauna."

She turned her head with a scowl and saw Jackie looking at her with a clenched jaw and dark, narrowed eyes. A zip of irritation went through her, like lightning shooting her in the chest. Shauna was about to snap back at her when she noticed Jackie's eyes were red and glistening with tears.

Shauna sighed and moved to go, irritation vanishing with the sight of more of Jackie's tears, but the tight grip around her wrist still held. They kept eye contact for a few more seconds, Jackie's thumb moving to her pulse point and feeling how it pounded.

The grip released with no fanfare, and Shauna walked back to her seat by the window to examine her bruised wrist. It was something Jackie loved to do since their fallout—leave bruises or marks behind on Shauna.

Mari got done with dinner, and Tai sat next to Shauna, shaking her head at her.

---

The next morning, Shauna sat quietly as she let Laura Lee lead their daily prayer. She was unsurprisingly very good at it and came up with affirmations and encouragements that Shauna would've never thought of herself.

Natalie sat next to Shauna, eyes closed and very peaceful. She looked more pious and worshipful than anyone else there.

The door of the cabin slammed open, jolting Natalie from her daily nap, and Tai walked by. She rolled her eyes at Shauna, who nodded hello in return. Then she scowled at Van, who avoided her eye.

A few minutes went by, and Shauna felt eyes on her. She glanced around, but no one was paying her attention. Shauna looked at the cabin, and that's when she realized it was Jackie.

She was standing in the window and frowning as she looked at their circle. The worried look stayed on her face, and then she caught Shauna staring back, and her expression turned into a dark angry glare.

They held each other's eyes, neither willing to look away first.

After a few moments, Shauna's lips twitched. She felt like they were children playing a silly game again, and it was hard not to smile.

Finally, Shauna couldn't contain her amused grin, and Jackie's eyes widened.

She took a sharp turn away, and the window was empty again, making Shauna's smile drop.

Shauna spent the rest of the daily prayer brooding.

---

It was hours later as she prepared for dinner again in the meat shed, and for the first time that day, Shauna was alone.

"What was that with Lottie last night?" Jackie asked as she stormed inside, breaking Shauna's peace for the second night in a row.

Her teeth ground together, aggravation growing at Jackie coming in here and doing whatever the hell she wanted, as usual.

"What is it about this place that makes you so talkative?" Shauna said.

Jackie spun her around, glaring, and Shauna pulled her knife hand back with a gasp.

“Be fucking careful!” Shauna snapped, pulling the blade back further.

Hazel eyes glanced down at the knife and then back up at her. “Now you care about hurting me?”

Shauna rolled her eyes and went to turn around. “Jackie, go back to your sewing circle. I don’t ha—”

A hand grabbed her wrist with the knife and squeezed until Shauna dropped it.

She pushed Shauna until her back hit the wall. “Leave her alone, Shauna. I’m serious.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because she’s my friend, and she doesn’t need to be in the middle of your sick games.” Jackie said, pushing harder.

Shauna’s jaw clenched, looking away. Firecrackers went off in her chest at Jackie’s assumptions.

A hand gripped her jaw, squeezing it tight, and bringing her face to look at Jackie’s.

“Do you do this with her, too?” Shauna snarled, clenching her fists.

Jackie’s hand fell. She blinked a few times in shock, then her eyes narrowed. “How is that any of your business, Shauna?”

She breathed out, making herself calm down, and tried to convince herself it wasn’t because she was afraid Jackie would leave without letting Shauna touch her first.

“Did you come in here just to yell at me, or was there something else you needed?” Shauna said, tilting her head.

Jackie swallowed, and her glare strayed to the side.

She examined Jackie, the fury and pain on her face. Shauna’s hand came up, and her index finger—the same one she’d dragged along her spine weeks ago while zipping her dress—pressed against Jackie’s wind chapped lips.

Shauna watched it, still waiting, not pushing further than Jackie let her. Her mouth opened with a narrow glare.

Her finger went into warmth and pressed onto Jackie’s tongue once, twice, and then it was as she was expecting. A jaw clamped down hard, making Shauna grunt at the sharp feeling of teeth ripping into her skin.

Blood dribbled down her knuckles, and she removed her hand, chuckling. She shrugged, “You know that doesn’t bother—”

Jackie spit all the blood and saliva that was in her mouth back into her face. Shauna’s head reared back, breath hitching in her throat. Some of the saliva dripped onto her upper lip, and she swallowed, resisting the urge to lick it up like a dog.

Jackie's face slackened and started filling with regret, but Shauna didn't want that. She didn't want Jackie guilty and feeling bad for herself. She wanted her present and angry, giving Shauna so much attention she burned with it.

Shauna smirked at her. Goading and aggravating, an expression she knew would grate on Jackie's nerves.

A howl of wind passed through their metal shed. Then Jackie glared, letting out an angry sound in the back of her throat. She surged forward again.

Furious, harsh lips clashed with hers. It was so violent, Shauna wondered if lips could bruise. Then she spun them around so Jackie was against the wall. Her hand went towards Jackie's sweatpants—which actually were Shauna's sweatpants, she noted with pride.

Jackie's arms went around her shoulders as Shauna's hand went straight into her underwear and entered her with no buildup. She grunted, pulling her as close as she could, and squeezing Shauna's shoulders tight enough to bruise—like she wanted to punish Shauna for Jackie's need to be near her.

"Asshole," Jackie grunted.

Shauna's breath hitched as she realized the finger inside Jackie was still bleeding, and she felt crazed with the knowledge that something so intrinsic to Shauna would be inside Jackie, too.

Shauna's finger increased in speed, and Jackie whined as her palm met her clit. "You're already plenty wet, Jax."

"Do not! Call me that," Jackie said around a moan.

"Why not, Jax?" Shauna whispered in her ear and ignored the soft hand coming up to rub the scar on her throat.

"Only my friends get to call me that," Jackie gasped. Her left hand dug her nails into Shauna's back.

Shauna's pace increased, and her snarling face got as close to Jackie's as possible. "No! Only *I'm* allowed to call you that."

"Maybe I'll tell Lottie to call me it right after this," Jackie gasped into her mouth. "I'll go in still wet, and ask her to call me Jax from now on."

Shauna stared at her, pace not slowing. Imagining Jackie's threats twisted her stomach up so badly it made her nauseous. She wondered if Jackie would forgive her if she vomited up her heart and handed it over.

"Nothing to say?" Jackie asked with a mean smirk.

Shauna moved forward, and her lips were soft and careful as they traced over Jackie's. Her hand still pounded into her, but her mouth juxtaposed that with the gentleness she always preferred to show her instead.

Jackie's breath hitched, her eyes widened, and a gush of wetness met Shauna's hand. Her mouth moved slow and gentle from her lips to her face, and Jackie's cries and gasps got

louder than ever.

“Wh-what are you—” Jackie’s eyes were wide as she clutched onto Shauna tighter.

Finally, Shauna’s lips met Jackie’s neck, and after very careful consideration, she chose a place too high to hide. Then she widened her mouth and sucked as hard and quick as she could, wanting the bruise to be obvious.

Jackie yelped. “You bitch!”

Shauna smiled around what she knew would be a stupidly large hickey and raised her lips to Jackie’s ear. “Just come already, Jax. I have a bear to finish carving,” she whispered.

Jackie shook and tightened. Coming with a tearful cry of, “I hate you!”

---

Jackie finally left her to get dinner prepared, and Shauna didn’t even get annoyed when she had to stick her hands in the snow to wash them off this time. She was too busy thinking about Jackie—which wasn’t new. She was almost always thinking about Jackie.

This time though, she was thinking about what she said ‘I hate you.’ Shauna wondered if she really did, or if Jackie just said it to bother her.

Her cuts of the bear get sloppier as the question wouldn’t leave her mind. She’s not sure which scenario pissed her off more. That Jackie hated her, or that Jackie knew Shauna well enough to guess telling her she did would upset her.

It would be just like her either way.

No one ever got that Jackie wasn’t just the innocent, helpless victim of Shauna’s evil machinations. That she could be cruel, too.

That Jackie shouldn’t be allowed to hate Shauna, because this whole thing was also her fault.

Shauna remembered how it had been gradual at first. She’d get told she needed to change because Jackie knew better, and had better, and was better. Little by little. Inch by squeezing inch. It slowly suffocated her until Shauna couldn’t breathe with the weight of control bearing down on her chest from the fear of being *wrong* in a way Jackie disliked.

No one seemed to get that, though. Or if they did, they didn’t care. Because they hear what Shauna did in return to break some of those chains that kept her chest from fully expanding, and suddenly she’s the villain.

## 8. Snowball

Shauna sighed and walked into the cabin with their rations.

“You had to cut down again?” Mari groaned, grabbing the plate.

She sighed. “Yeah, hopefully Nat and Travis find something tomorrow.”

Mari hummed in agreement, but looked doubtful.

Shauna glanced around.

Tai and Van were curled up together laughing, and Natalie was playing a card game with Javi that she made up.

Coach Ben was sitting by himself and muttering in the corner, and Shauna needed to remember to look into that. He’d been doing that lately, and it was freaking her out.

She frowned and her eyes continued to wander, looking for the person she’d really wanted to check on. She found Jackie was in the corner, hunched over someone’s pants she was trying to finish fixing.

Shauna’s lips pursed as she noticed she somehow looked even smaller today than she did yesterday. The thinness of her frame made her pregnant belly look even larger in return as her near skeletal fingers tried to keep hold of the needle to sew.

She frowned and moved over to Akilah. Shauna crouched down where she sat on the floor, causing Akilah to look at her in surprise.

“Hey, why’s Jackie still working? She knows we can relax now.” Shauna asked, glancing worriedly over at Jackie again.

Akilah sighed and said, “She’s been having trouble staying awake lately. I think she wants to make sure she fixes her share since she didn’t get much done today.”

“You guys told her it didn’t matter, right?” Shauna asked with a furrowed brow.

“Yeah, I think she’s been feeling…” Akilah trailed off, looking away with a frown. Shauna raised a brow. “Unhelpful, lately,” Akilah continued after getting her thoughts back in order.

Shauna tapped her fingers on her thighs in thought. Trying to think of a solution that wasn’t just ‘get more food’, but it was obvious that was the answer.

“Has she been drinking her tea at least?” Shauna said with a sigh.

Akilah nodded. “Yep, every day. I’ve been making sure she remembers, just like you asked.”

“Okay. Thanks, Akilah.” Shauna stood with a sigh and resisted screaming.

She made her way to where Travis was watching Natalie and Javi’s game and sat nearby. Shauna had only been inside five minutes and she already felt exhausted.

She could see Jackie needed someone to take care of her. And the sight of how sickly she looked made Shauna feel like crying, especially because Jackie wouldn't let her help anymore.

So she'd just have to use everyone else to do it instead.

"Javi, can you do me a favor?" She asked, smiling.

He looked up, eyes wide and eager, and she ignored the slight wariness that came to Travis' gaze as he watched. "Can you go give Jackie some more pine needle tea and see if you can convince her to save the sewing for tomorrow? I think she might listen to you."

Travis' shoulders dropped in relief, and Javi nodded, happy to help.

"Thanks, Javi. I appreciate it." Shauna smiled at him and stood again.

Natalie looked at her, and her gaze held sympathy. She smiled and said. "Well, since you took away my opponent, what do you say, Shauna?" She held up the cards.

She moved to Javi's place and smirked at Nat. "Sure, if you're not afraid of me kicking your ass again."

Natalie rolled her eyes, looking at her like Shauna was the bane of her existence. "I don't know how. You still don't even understand the rules."

Shauna shrugged and waited for Mari to finish dinner. A tentative idea forming in her head that she'd speak to Natalie about tomorrow.

---

Shauna and Natalie were outside the next day, idly walking a circle around the clearing so they could get some fresh air without freezing.

"Natalie, I think we need to consider the pointy sticks again," Shauna said with a sigh.

"Fine, but they better stab you first when they lose it," Natalie said, scowling.

Shauna ignored her and asked, "What do you think, two teams of two for small game hunting?"

She was in a good mood that day, and it was the only reason Shauna didn't question Natalie on why she'd never suggested this herself. Hunting was her and Travis' domain after all.

"Do we have four people with good enough arms? Maybe we should've done softball instead of soccer," Natalie huffed.

"Didn't Mari tell Jackie she had a good arm?" Shauna asked, trying to remember the conversation from so long before.

Natalie huffed out a laugh. "You mean when they wanted to check if coach was dead and Mari was two seconds away from sending Jackie a valentine?"

Shauna let out a slow, irritated breath. "Yes."

"Oh relax. Fine, that's one."

“Melissa, I guess.”

“Is it just because of the stupid hat, or has she shown something that said good at throwing?” Natalie asked and then blew on her hands to warm them up.

“The hat,” Shauna said as she watched Jackie laugh with Lottie and Akilah through the cabin window.

“Ugh, god. You’re really pathetic.” Natalie kicked at some snow.

They’ve become pretty good friends over the last month, and she had to learn quick that half the things Natalie said were jokes, and the other half were some type of affectionate. In this case, she’s pretty sure this was meant to be affectionate.

“Thank you,” Shauna idly said while continuing to stare at Jackie.

“Usually, that girl is such a pushover for you. I’m surprised she hasn’t accepted your apology yet.”

“I didn’t apologize.” Shauna shrugged.

Natalie froze in place. Shauna realized she stopped and looked back. “Well, why the fuck not?!” she asked, exasperated.

Shauna stayed in place and looked up, considering it. “I don’t want to.”

Perhaps Shauna felt owed this one. After so many years and so much criticism, could Shauna not act out for a bit and get away with it, without consequence? Should she not get some leeway here?

Her plan was to never verbally admit to any wrongdoing and hope everyone got over it eventually and moved on.

Natalie scowled at her. “I hope she smothers you in your sleep.”

Shauna’s lips quirked. “I figured you’d want that honor.”

“No, I think she deserves it more for having to deal with”—Natalie gestures to all of her—“whatever the hell you’ve got going on.”

Shauna breathed out heavily through her nose, but let her annoyance go. “Whatever. Let’s just try to figure out who can go out for small game.”

Natalie sighed at her like Shauna was more stressful than survival, but said, “We can test people’s throws, but I have no clue how.”

Shauna looked up in thought. “I think I have an idea.”

Natalie raised a brow, looking intrigued.

---

“Pick up those feet, Misty!” Shauna called. She nodded to a grinning Mari, who packed together a snowball and threw it.

It nailed Misty right in the head, causing her to shriek.

Natalie snickered.

“What are you guys doing?” Akilah asked as her Lottie and Jackie came outside at the commotion.

“Just trying to see who’s got a good arm,” Natalie said with a smirk.

“Any reason you’re torturing Misty to do it?” Jackie asked with a frown, crossing her arms.

“She’s being punished,” Shauna said and watched Mari nail her with another one. “Alright, Mari. Nice job.”

Mari smiled and moved out of the way.

“Wow, Shauna. You praised someone without sounding like a weirdo.” Natalie smirked with a nod. “I always knew you could do it.” She nudged her with her arm and Shauna smiled, rolling her eyes.

“What did Misty even do to deserve this?” Jackie interrupted as she looked between with a dark scowl.

“She was being a bitch,” Shauna said blandly, making sure not to look at Lottie as she answered. “Melissa! Let’s see it.”

She stepped up with a large grin, pink hat bright in the sun. Grabbing a snowball, she heaved her arm forward, hitting Misty in the back and causing her to cry out.

Melissa whooped, and Shauna laughed.

Jackie grabbed her shoulder, twisting her around. “You guys are just bullying her now. Is this middle school? What the fuck?”

Shauna’s eye glanced down and she smirked at the sight of the bruise she sucked into her throat. Jackie’s face flushed red, and Shauna used the distraction to turn back, figuring she’d get bored and leave.

Jackie grabbed her again and spun her around. “Shauna!”

Everyone froze. Waiting to see where this was going.

Shauna brushed her hand away. “Mind your own business, Jackie.”

Lottie looked down at her feet with furrowed brows.

“Who told you to stop?! Keep going,” Shauna shouted at Misty.

Jackie made an annoyed noise in the back of her throat, and Shauna could feel her stare burn into the back of her head. “You’re really letting this forest cult *bullshit* get to your head, Shauna.”

The door slammed behind her as she went back inside.

Shauna frowned, the accusation burning.

She turned to Lottie, who hadn’t followed inside yet, and raised her brow.

Lottie glanced at Misty, still running. She stepped closer. “Is that because of me?” she asked quietly.

Shauna nodded and kept her voice low as she said, “I’ll make sure everyone knows not to bother you from now on. Let me know if anyone does.”

Lottie’s brows rose on her forehead. “Okay, thanks, Shauna.”

She gave her a small smile and then turned back to call out for the next person.

---

The thunk of Van’s axe was the only noise outside as Shauna stared down at Misty with an annoyed frown. The few people who she and Natalie had come up with had gotten a turn throwing snowballs, and Shauna had turned away anyone else who just wanted to throw stuff at Misty for fun.

Shauna understood, but it’d really ruin the point of this if she let it happen.

“I was trying to do you a favor.” Misty said, wheezing with her hands on her knees.

“How is torturing Lottie doing me a favor?” Shauna asked, with her arms crossed, looking down at her without sympathy.

“Everyone can see her being close to Jackie makes you nuts.” Misty said, catching her breath. “I thought I’d, I don’t know…” she trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

The cabin door opened to Shauna’s right, but she ignored it, focused on making sure Misty stopped acting batshit crazy while still being associated with her.

“Misty, what have I said about your plans?” Shauna raised a brow. “We do not use your plans. Ever.”

Misty opened her mouth.

“Never ever, ever,” Shauna spoke over her. ‘Next time, I’m gonna throw rocks at you.’ She pointed to the cabin. “Go.”

Misty walked into the cabin with her head down, and Shauna finally looked up by the door to see it was Jackie who came outside.

“Oh, so you’re done torturing her then?” Jackie sat down on the porch chair with a sigh and crossed her legs. “Not gonna make her run until she vomits?” she asked, tone as snide as humanly possible.

Shauna sat down on the steps, taking out her knife and grabbing the long sturdy branch that’d been found and waiting nearby.

“It was a punishment, not a hazing, Jax,” she said as she started whittling its tip into something sharp.

Jackie leaned forward and put her hands on her legs. “Since when were you so strict, Shauna?”

She noticed she didn't say anything about her calling her Jax, and she smirked, focusing her head down at her hands.

"There's a book in the cabin about parenting styles, and I think the authoritative one really spoke to me." Shauna nodded.

"Oh, really? There is?" Jackie asked, rolling her eyes. "I must've missed it while looking around."

Shauna turned and smirked at her. "Yeah, it was between a couple of dead guy's porn magazines, so you probably just got distracted before you could find it."

"Wow Shauna, so I guess that would mean *you* were looking through dead guy's gross porn mags." Jackie stood with a smile and raised her brows, looking at Shauna like she was her personal court jester.

Shauna's smile dropped as she realized what she'd said.

Jackie let out a high-pitched hum and opened the cabin door. Turning back, she smiled. "And I told you not to call me Jax anymore."

The door slammed behind her, and Van, who was coming in from chopping wood, started laughing at Shauna. "Damn." She gave her a thumbs up. "You played that really well. She didn't make you look like an idiot at all."

"Shut up." Shauna stood up and went in, deciding she'd finish later.

---

"The only two who could hit a damn thing were Mari and Melissa," Natalie said with a scowl.

"Two is better than nothing, though, right?" Tai said with furrowed brows.

Natalie sighed. "Yeah, but it's only for small game. More would still be better."

Tai looked down in thought. "I guess… I could go…" she grimaced.

Shauna huffed out a laugh. "Tai, your arm sucks." She shook her head and glanced over at Jackie's too prominent cheekbones.

Her thoughts became stuck on the image of Jackie sitting in the corner, desperately trying to finish her sewing after she kept passing out from hunger all day. "I'll go."

They both whipped their heads to her in surprise.

"Shauna, what?" Natalie laid her hands down on the kitchen table and leaned closer to her. "You can't be serious. You have a whole…" she waved her hands to gesture to the members of her group.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure they'd all Jim Jones themselves if you died, Shauna." Tai said, exasperated.

Shauna rolled her eyes. "I'm not gonna die walking through the woods looking for some bunnies." She glanced between them both. 'I know I've got pretty good aim, and maybe my

speed can help somehow.' Her eyes once again strayed to a too thin Jackie. "Someone needs to do it."

"There's over a dozen people here. Not one of them can throw a stick?!" Tai asked with a scowl.

"Is anyone even gonna listen if you're not here?" Natalie asked with an incredulous laugh. "This is so fucking stupid."

"You're both being so dramatic right now. I'm not going to war." She shook her head. "I think the cabin will survive without me for a few hours a day."

Tai groaned. "Shauna, think about who we're talking about right now."

"Fine. You're in charge while I'm gone." She glanced over to the other oblivious occupants of the cabin. "I'll tell them I had a feeling it should be you. It'll work," Shauna added, as Tai still looked doubtful.

Shauna figured if she came back with food, they wouldn't give a shit either way anyway.

"Okay, fine." Tai sighed. "But I'm not gonna lead prayer to the fucking trees."

Shauna scoffed. "That's Laura Lee's job, and she really looks forward to it, so you wouldn't get it even if you wanted it."

Tai and Natalie shared a look of disbelief.

Laura Lee had been down after Lottie wouldn't follow her into the cult, and Shauna giving her daily prayer had really raised her spirits.

Natalie shook her head at her and moved on. "You're still not going out there alone."

"Well, who else can be moved from their current job and doesn't throw like their arm is broken?" Shauna said, exasperated that this conversation kept going in circles.

"I'll do it."

They all turned to the voice, not having realized they hadn't been alone for their conversation.

"Javi?" Natalie said with a frown.

Shauna stepped closer, that softer expression she always unconsciously reserved for Javi on her face. "You want to go out?"

His nod started slowly, and then quickly picked up speed. "Yeah. I already feel like I'm not contributing enough." He put his hands in his pockets and looked at his shuffling feet. "And uh. I played pitcher in little league."

Natalie and Tai looked doubtful, but Shauna smiled at him.

---

Travis looked back and forth between while chewing on his thumb. "You really want to do this, Javi?"

Javi swallowed, but nodded.

“A-and you’ll keep him safe, right?” Travis looked at Shauna desperately.

She put her hand on Javi’s shoulder. “Of course I will, Travis.” Shauna nodded. “I won’t let anything happen to him.”

Travis looked between them a few more times and bit his lip. “Alright, j-just be careful.”

Javi walked out, and Shauna smiled at Travis. “He’ll be fine.”

Travis sighed and nodded back. “Alright.”

Natalie, waiting near the door, sighed as Shauna walked up to her. “Well, one down, one to go.”

Shauna frowned at her, tilting her head. “What do you mean?”

“Why are they saying you’re going out?” an angry voice asked from behind Shauna.

She jumped and looked wide eyed at an amused Natalie. Shauna turned to see a scowling Jackie standing behind her with crossed arms.

“Uh,” Shauna said with an open mouth.

Natalie slipped past her and hurried away.

“They said you’re going hunting. But we already have hunters and only the one rifle, so that didn’t make any sense, Shauna!” Jackie snapped, fists clenched and voice tight with frustration.

Shauna raised her makeshift spear. “Sticks,” she said dumbly.

Jackie released a breath through her nose and stepped closer. She looked Shauna up and down with a frown, like she wasn’t sure if she’d hit her head recently. “What does that even mean?”

“Um, we’re, uh, going to hunt small game,” Shauna said, while staring at the tip of her spear.

She hadn’t stuttered and hesitated on her words like this in weeks.

Jackie stepped even closer, and Shauna looked at her with wide eyes. Jackie put her hand protectively over her stomach and glared at her. “You can’t!”

“Yes, I can,” she said, raising her sharpened spear and rolling her eyes. “I already have a stick and everything,”

Shauna glanced over to a grimacing Tai, who looked like she’d rather be anywhere else.

“Bu—” Jackie cut herself off and shook her head with a scowl. Her posture was stiff, hands shaking, and jaw clenched. “Y’know what? I don’t even know why I still care. Do whatever you want, Shauna.”

“I didn’t realize I needed your permission,” she snapped with a scowl.

Jackie blew out a large irritated breath and walked back over to Lottie and Akilah, who were abnormally focused on their work. She practically fell into her seat, her back ramrod straight in the chair.

Shauna made her way to Tai and muttered, “Make sure she gets half of my rations like usual if I’m not back by then.”

She was careful not to let Jackie know the extra rations came directly from her plate. She had a feeling Jackie might reject them out of spite.

Tai nodded and went back to try blending into the furniture.

Shauna opened the front door, ignoring the freezing winds to glare at Jackie’s stubbornly turned back, and then turned and let it slam behind her as she stepped into the cold.

# 9. Rabbits

Shauna patted down her warm cap and adjusted her hood, nodding to Javi as he did the same. It was freezing outside, as was expected, but so far, she and Javi were handling it well. They were lucky that it wasn't too windy a day, so they wouldn't have to worry too much about the cold stinging their faces and watering their eyes as they hunted.

She looked down at the rough directions Natalie wrote out for her.

*East 3 miles near split tree by large rock*

"Okay, this says three miles east." Shauna said to Javi.

He nodded in reply.

She glanced up at the sun and turned to go east.

"What did they find there?" Javi asked her, looking like he was trying to tamp down his excitement.

Shauna read the paper again. "A rabbit."

"Should we set traps?"

"I think we want them close by so a predator doesn't steal anything." She frowned, thinking. "If we ever get enough small game, we could try using one as bait. Might attract something bigger."

Javi's expression twisted. "That seems kinda messed up, doesn't it?"

Shauna frowned at him, not seeing what the big deal was. "Why? It's gonna be dead either way."

"I guess…" he trailed off.

She shrugged and kept it in mind for later.

Shauna thought through some other ideas. She's never hunted before, so she's mostly just guessing here for what could and couldn't work, but at least it was something to pass the time.

She wondered where that wolf attack from so long ago was. Maybe someone should go on another expedition again. Though the cold would make it much more dangerous, so maybe not.

Shauna had a passing thought—what if they used one of their own as bait for a wolf? It'd just be a larger scale version of her earlier idea. Sure, they'd have to trust Natalie to make the shot in time, but if it ended up with an entire wolf to eat, then it would definitely be worth it.

She imagined it for a moment, stabbing one of her teammates with her knife and pushing them to the ground with a thumbs up. Waiting with an angry Natalie who berated her and her

plan. The fact she was even going along with it at all was a good sign this was just in Shauna's mind and not reality.

"Shauna!"

She broke from her thoughts and turned to a wide eyed Javi. He pointed down, and she saw what he did. Tiny little footprints in the snow.

They looked at each other with a grin and then carefully followed it, trying not to make too much noise. Shauna noticed Javi was surprisingly good at it.

She walked around a tree, Javi at her side and just kept herself from gasping when she saw a white rabbit sitting there, distracted by something it was nibbling on.

Shauna stood and pulled her arm back, and threw her makeshift spear at it before she could over think it and screw up. It landed right in its little body with a dull squish and crunch. A splatter of red blood landed on the pure white snow around it, and Shauna felt a spark go down her spine that was even larger than the one she got when she bled that first deer.

She grinned at a wide eyed Javi. He blinked in shock and then smiled back.

Picking up her spear, she brought the rabbit to her and eyed it in thought. The stick went through its back and out of its chest. Neither the exit nor the entrance wound showed a clean puncture as it looked like the spear tore through its body—so much different from the orderly slices Shauna was used to with her knife.

The rabbit dripped crimson all over the place. Such a small body held so much life. Shauna imagined herself twisting the animal like a wet towel and squeezing the blood out that way.

All together, it was a far more violent end than any of the kills she'd seen from Natalie and Travis. She found it fascinating.

"Uh, Shauna…"

She turned to him, attention broken from it. "Yeah?"

"You're, um, getting blood on your clothes." He pointed at her and looked like he wanted to put a mile of space between them.

She glanced down to see there were a bunch of drops and splotches from when she brought it near her. She looked like a crime scene photo. Shauna wished she could say she had no clue how she didn't notice it, but she knew it was from how enamored she had become at the sight of the rabbit dead by her spear.

"Shit." She glared down at the animal, not feeling as much affection for it anymore. "Can you open the bag? I'll drop it in," she grumbled.

He did so, still looking uncomfortable with whatever expression must've been on her face earlier. After dropping it inside, she shook her head and gestured to a nervous Javi to keep going.

---

The rabbits were fairly abundant, and every throw of theirs felt perfect. Shauna had to wonder if desperation and hunger really were just that good of a motivator. So far this hunt had seemed way easier than she was led to believe, especially with how dramatic everyone was being about her going out.

“I think Travis and Natalie might be blind…” Javi said, putting their fourth catch into the bag.

Shauna laughed. “Maybe they were just too focused on bigger game.”

Javi raised his brow and looked over at the obvious rabbit footprints. “I guess. You’d think the snow would’ve made it easier.”

Shauna hummed and said, “The map could be helping us.”

“It hasn’t helped them.”

She sighed. “Then I guess they need glasses. I don’t know.”

“Do you think it’s your powers?” Javi asked with a grin.

Shauna considered the question. She hadn’t thought of using that angle here, but considering the lucky amount of game they found after only going out once, she didn’t see why not. She’d tell them that her presence made The Wilderness happy or something.

“Yeah, must be.” Shauna nodded and smiled. “Let’s head back. We don’t wanna kill too much here.”

“Maybe Melissa and Mari got stuff, too.” Javi said, practically floating on air.

“Maybe,” she muttered hopefully.

---

They walked into an empty clearing. Javi ran inside to tell everyone they got food, and Shauna went to butcher it.

She knew she was doing two jobs now, but she didn’t give a shit if that meant Jackie stopped looking so sickly.

The bag of four rabbits went onto her table and she almost grinned at the fact it wasn’t just the bear in there anymore.

Shauna heard the door open, and the smile didn’t drop off her face as she prepared one of the rabbits. “Hey, Jackie,” she called in greeting.

“Nope.” And she realized the voice was Natalie’s.

Her hand slipped on the knife, causing her to cut her palm on it. “Fuck!”

She raised her fist, already feeling like there was a burning sensation around the cut.

Footsteps scrambled closer and grabbed her wrist. “Shit, are you alright?”

“No! What are you doing in here?” Shauna said, glaring at her.

“Javi said you guys caught something. I wanted to see for myself. I didn’t realize me being in here would make you stab yourself.” She rolled her eyes and kept a hold of Shauna’s arm as she started dragging her to get it looked at.

“Let me finish first,” Shauna said with a scowl.

“I’m not having rabbit with a side of Shauna’s blood for dinner. Let someone clean up your damn hand.”

“It’ll be fine.” Shauna pulled her hand back and Natalie stubbornly held on, so they were practically playing tug of war with it.

“What are you doing?” Jackie asked from the doorway, looking at them like they were two stray animals who wandered in and started fighting on her pristine furniture.

Natalie dropped Shauna’s wrist with a roll of her eyes. “See if you can get her hand looked at. She’s being annoying as fuck about it.”

Jackie came in and frowned at Natalie’s back as she walked out. “I didn’t know you usually had other people in here,” she said, that small familiar pout working its way to her lips.

Shauna’s irritation at Jackie’s obliviousness to her oozing hand warred with how cute she found her right now.

“Jackie…” Shauna sighed and trailed off, not sure where she wanted to go with that.

A few more drops of blood steadily leaked on to the floor, and then Jackie’s eyes widened as she hurried to her side.

Jackie took Shauna’s hand, sighing when she saw the cut. “What happened?”

“Uh, Natalie startled me, so my hand slipped on the knife,” Shauna said, staring at Jackie as she held her hand to inspect it.

She let out a breath and looked up at Shauna from under her lashes. “I thought you were better with that thing, Shauna?”

Shauna’s heart started pounding, and she licked her lips as her mouth suddenly felt dust dry. She noticed Jackie’s eyes follow the motion and swallowed.

Jackie was getting Shauna with just one look, and it left her feeling especially pathetic, but the anger didn’t follow. She used to feel a lot of aggravation over being so attracted to her best friend, but that stopped once she found out it was reciprocated.

“I was expecting you, so hearing Natalie instead just really surprised me, I guess…” she trailed off as the ghost of a smile came onto Jackie’s face.

“You were expecting me?” Jackie asked while stepping close with a raised brow.

Shauna stumbled back a step, and her back knocked into the table. “Y-yes.”

“Why?” Jackie stepped forward, eyes tracing Shauna’s face like she didn’t want to miss anything.

“Well, you’re, uh, in here a lot…” Shauna trailed off with a swallow. Jackie had never put her on edge like this before.

She hummed, and then her finger dragged across Shauna’s palm to where the fresh wound was. She looked at Shauna, studying her face, and then pressed down with her nail, making Shauna hiss and tense her arm.

Shauna’s breathing sped up, and she watched Jackie’s pupils expand in real time.

Jackie moved her hand out of the way and leaned forward to Shauna’s ear. “You ignored me today.”

Shauna blinked, coming slightly out of her haze. Was she talking about when she didn’t listen to Jackie about not going out? She scowled, her lust being dried up beneath her bubbling annoyance. “So?”

Jackie’s eyes narrowed, looking at Shauna like she was a misbehaving dog, making her even more infuriated. “Nothi—”

Shauna’s hand, the cut one, the bloody unclean one, came up and covered Jackie’s mouth.

Jackie’s eyes widened in shock. A quick breath exhaled through her nose. Then Shauna pushed her back, wanting her against the wall and away from the dead rabbits she knew the other girl hated.

She watched her face carefully, wanting to make sure Jackie wasn’t upset. Her face had a lot of anger, desire, and the slightest hint of disgust, but nothing that indicated she wanted Shauna to stop what she was doing.

“What’s gonna make you leave me alone about this, Jackie?” she asked as she leaned as close as her stomach would allow.

Jackie’s eyes darkened, a glare forming on her brow. Then she closed her eyes, and Shauna could feel as she swallowed.

There was a slight pressure on her palm, a soft, quick peck of skin that caused her hand to sting and be soothed in the same breath. It took her a moment to realize it was Jackie kissing her bloody hand.

The realization that Jackie’s lips soothed her bloody palm made Shauna feel like she’d combust. Her heart was beating as fast as one of the dead rabbits behind her before they met their end, and then she finally couldn’t hold it anymore. She ripped her palm away to devour Jackie’s mouth.

The taste of blood was invigorating, and the fact it was her own somehow made the experience even better. It flared through her body and reminded her there was more on Jackie to find if she could just bear to control herself for two seconds.

Shauna’s head leaned back, and she examined the blood covering around Jackie’s mouth. The same mouth that was twisted into a furious scowl.

“You’re disgusting,” Jackie snarled, panting.

Shauna searched her face and saw it was all lust, her anger a facade. She grinned and leaned forward, her tongue slowly slithering out from her mouth as she glanced up to see Jackie's eyes following her.

The first touch of her tongue was to Jackie's chin, and Shauna could feel the tremble in her body as Jackie wrapped her arms around her shoulders. A short grunt released from Jackie when she couldn't reach all the way around Shauna like she used to.

Shauna's appendage moved up and swiped up to her lips, causing Jackie to gasp. She ignored the inside of her mouth, as she knew that was where Jackie wanted her. Instead, she traced around her lips, cleaning Jackie's face of every spot of red she saw.

Jackie's trembling worsened, and by the time Shauna finally cleaned her face of her blood and her lips made their way to Jackie's again. She was shaking in Shauna's arms as she kept trying to lean into her, but was having trouble.

When their lips connected, it caused Jackie to release a moan, and Shauna moved her knee forward—having just enough room if she shifted her body to the side to avoid the stomach that grew by the day.

Jackie tried to move forward and grip her closer again, but her stomach got in the way. Her hands clutched Shauna tighter, and a high-pitched noise came from her mouth.

If Jackie didn't have such a tight grip on her shoulders, Shauna would assume she wanted to get away from her with all of her wiggling.

She tried again, shifting this way, and then that, but nothing Jackie did could make her body maneuver where she wanted it to. Jackie continued shifting around, frustration coming off her in waves, and Shauna was growing concerned.

Finally, Jackie released a keening whine from her throat, and said, "I hate this so fucking much. I just want it out and away from me already!"

Shauna pulled back, not having expected the outburst. Jackie's face was red and scrunched up, and there were a few stray tears as she got emotional. Shauna frowned and slowed her knee, pulling back.

A hand gripped her hair and yanked. "Don't you dare stop after you fucking started this in the first place, Shauna!"

Shauna's eyes widened, and she did as Jackie commanded without hesitation, like it was encoded into her brain by now to listen to Jackie when she used that tone. Her knee went back, Jackie keeping up her own furious pace, but Shauna's mind was still in shambles, unsure if she should put a stop to this or not.

Jackie's tears increased as well as her sobs, and Shauna couldn't tell if it was from pleasure or because Jackie was distressed.

She was becoming uncomfortable, not finding this fun anymore, and always hating it when Jackie cried. She hesitated, but another stream of tears rolled down Jackie's face, and she couldn't take it anymore.

Shauna was going to lose her mind if she didn't calm Jackie down.

She removed her leg and ignored the angry wordless noise Jackie released to put her arms around her shoulders and make soothing noises while stroking her back.

Jackie fought against the hold only for a moment, before practically collapsing into Shauna's arms with a heaving sob.

Shauna had never seen Jackie so upset before. It was like her cries were being ripped from her body. With the sight, what was once just lingering resentment of the thing growing inside Jackie then turned into full on hatred after seeing how much it was hurting her.

She wanted to rip it from Jackie's womb and use it as bait for one of the traps she imagined herself setting earlier. At least then it could finally be useful and help Shauna fill Jackie's belly with food instead of its parasitic presence.

---

Jackie left after sobbing into Shauna's arms for so long that she was surprised no one came out to see where the rations were. When she finally could get herself together, Jackie wiped pitifully at her face, avoided Shauna's worried eye, and left quickly after muttering, "Thanks, Shauna."

She still felt out of sorts, but unfortunately, Shauna didn't think people inside would care for her excuse that she couldn't prepare dinner after seeing Jackie's breakdown.

She walked in with enough rabbit and bear meat that everyone could have double the amount of rations they'd had in weeks.

Shauna handed it to Mari, and she looked back at her with glossy eyes, on the brink of tears.

"I'm sorry we couldn't find anything, Shauna," she said while putting everything together.

Her brow furrowed, not sure why she was so upset. She thought she'd be celebrating. They'd be going to bed hungry that night, but not starving. There was a big difference.

She reached up and patted her shoulder. "It's okay, Mari."

Mari nodded, still despondent, and Shauna frowned. Maybe she couldn't handle the stress of this. Melissa, talking to a couple of friends, didn't seem half as upset.

She walked away and sat next to Tai. "Hey."

"Hey, you okay? You seem down," Tai asked with a worried frown.

Shauna wiped whatever miserable look must've been on her face away and forced herself to smile. "I'm fine, just tired. Don't worry."

Tai looked doubtful, but nodded. "Okay, if you ever change your mind, let me know."

Shauna's smile grew slightly more real.

They were distracted from their conversation by Coach Ben saying, "Thanks, Paul," as Mari handed him his rations.

Shauna frowned at him, and she noticed quite a few others doing the same.

“Has he been doing that all day?” Shauna asked Tai, who looked equally uncomfortable at that display.

“No, he’s mostly been muttering in his room.” Tai said with a frown.

“Okay, keep an eye on him.”

She really didn’t need more bullshit right now. She was already stressed enough.

Her eyes wandered the room again, looking for Jackie, needing to check on her. She found her sitting quietly with Lottie, who didn’t seem to need to fill their bubble of solitude by speaking. They both looked calm as they sat peacefully in each other’s presence.

She wanted to go over there and comfort Jackie, but she knew she wouldn’t accept it now that they weren’t in the shed.

There was an odd feeling in her chest as she watched Jackie use Lottie’s soothing presence to help herself.

There was the expected jealousy, of course, and a bit of generalized anger, but beneath all of that there was a tiny speck of gratitude that someone could be there for Jackie when Shauna couldn’t.

It was the first time in her life Shauna felt happy Jackie had another friend.

## 10. Porcupine

Shauna woke up that morning still thinking about Jackie's breakdown from the day before. It made her chest ache in pain and anger, but it also made her remember how human Jackie could be. How imperfect.

This whole time, she'd thought Jackie had her shit together—as much as one could out here at least. A few months ago, Shauna would've probably reveled in the revelation that perfect princess Jackie was failing to navigate her life. Now she just had the overwhelming urge to fix it.

The display from yesterday was so pathetic, and so depressing to witness, that it made something about Jackie click into place.

A little light bulb went off in her head saying: She's not a barbie!

Life was as unfair to her as it could be to anyone else, and she didn't actually have an entire toy line made to fit exactly to her standards.

It seemed so obvious in retrospect, and yet here she was—shocked.

She wondered if her revelation would change something, or if it'd be more of the same.

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Shauna noticed Misty hovering over Lottie as she worked that morning, and a massive frown came to her lips as she stomped over.

"What's going on?" She asked, stopping behind Jackie's chair.

Jackie titled her head back to look at her, stretching her neck and looking at Shauna upside down instead of just twisting in her seat.

Her face was as pretty as always, though still way too sharp and thin, but the angle was making her hair flop up.

Shauna glanced at her, lips twitching at how ridiculous and cute she looked.

"N-Nothing, Shauna!" Misty said with wide eyes, breaking her from her thoughts.

Shauna turned to Lottie and rose a brow.

"It's fine. Misty was asking me about some stuff I learned in therapy," Lottie said, smiling.

Shauna nodded her head slowly, now wondering why, but as long as Misty wasn't being an asshole again, she guessed it wasn't her business anymore.

Looking down, she noticed Jackie glancing around with deeply furrowed brows.

Misty and Lottie got into conversation again, and Shauna still felt so much worry and pain thinking about yesterday—she needed to make sure Jackie was okay. She leaned down next to

Jackie's ear and whispered, "Are you feeling better today, Jax?"

Jackie's face tilted toward hers, and Shauna didn't move away. Shauna stared at her with what she knew were stupid soft eyes, and Jackie looked back with dark circles under her own.

"Yes…" Her eyes roamed Shauna's face intently, and there was some embarrassment in her gaze, but it was warring with something soft and curious. "Thanks for asking."

Shauna bobbed her head up and down. She stood straight and noted the other three girls avoided looking in their direction.

"Um, okay. Let me know if you need anything." She nodded her head, feeling an innocent softness for Jackie she hadn't felt in years, and turned to sit back on the other side of the room.

Shauna doubted Jackie would take her up on her offer, but she felt compelled to at least try. She'd been too stubborn and afraid of Jackie's rejection before to do so, but today, she found she didn't really care.

Jackie's eyes stayed locked on her, studying her as she walked away.

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They had two rabbits already, which wasn't bad, but a little more would be even better. It was only their second time out, but to Shauna it already seemed like it was getting colder. She wouldn't have even believed it was possible if she didn't feel how it penetrated her many layers of clothes.

Shauna needed to see about getting a proper scarf to protect her face out here soon, and maybe some new gloves. These made holding her spear a pain with how stiff they were.

"Should we head back, Shauna?" Javi asked hesitantly.

"Let's try one more area. This one's only a mile away."

Javi nodded, and they both started heading out.

"Shauna… I have a question…" he said, as they made their way over a steep hill.

"Okay. Go ahead," she said, glancing at him curiously.

"Why did you choose to bless Travis?" Javi asked, wide eyed.

She kept walking, trying to figure out an answer that sounded plausible. "Well, he was my first follower… don't you think he should get rewarded for that?" Shauna smiled and looked him in the eyes as she lied straight to his face, hoping it'd make it more believable.

Javi nodded in return, an excited smile in place. "That makes sense." He bit his lip, hesitating, and Shauna let him get his thoughts in order as she examined the ground for tracks.

"Can I get your blessing, too?" Javi asked, looking down.

Shauna paused, frowning. "Why do you want my blessing?"

“I’m just… I’m really um”—he looked down, ashamed— “I’m scared out here, all the time. I-I was hoping your blessing might make me feel uh…”

Shauna frowned and hesitated. It would be kinda nice to know she made him feel better, but it’d also be bullshit. But well… did that really matter? As long as it made him *feel* protected, would it really make a difference if it actually did?

And if she blessed him, and he survived, fine, then Shauna gets the credit. Nothing changed for him, and everything is great. And if something happened to him—well, they’re hunting fucking bunnies. She doubted that was happening.

Maybe… she could tell him not to tell anyone she blessed him, so if he died—which again Shauna *highly* doubted, but it didn’t hurt to plan—no one would question why her blessing didn’t protect him.

But how could she convince him to—

“It’s okay, Shauna. I get it if you can’t,” Javi said, while looking down with a frown.

He looked so young suddenly. She forgot he was actually five years younger than her, especially after his growth spurt. A thirteen-year-old in this situation… She was eighteen and figured most people back home already thought of that as a tragedy. She can only imagine how they thought of Javi’s presence here.

She sighed and grabbed his shoulders. “You’re blessed.” Shauna squeezed, nodding with a serious expression.

He grinned, eyes sparkling as he puffed up his chest. “Thank you! I’ll make sure to help as much as I can. I won’t let you down!”

Shauna nodded. She wasn’t really sure what he meant by that, as she didn’t remember making up some kind of responsibility to go along with her fake blessing, but whatever. Sure.

She felt a little bad lying to him like that, but Shauna also didn’t think it was that big of a deal in the long run. Two seconds of her time and he already looked much more confident out here.

They kept moving, and Javi had a wide smile and extra pep in his step as they went.

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Along with the two rabbits, they caught one porcupine—something Shauna had no idea how the hell she was supposed to butcher.

They were lucky to get it, though. It could feed so many more people compared to just one rabbit. She hated to say it, but it felt almost like a gift.

Shauna wasn’t even sure how she killed it. She made a throw and hit it in one of the few vulnerable areas it had, and she knows it wasn’t because she’s suddenly an amazing spear user. Her luck had Javi looking star struck again, and made Shauna wonder if she should start seriously praying to the goddamn trees.

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“Fuck!”

Shauna was in the shed, *not* having fun dealing with this damn porcupine. Shauna had barely touched it when trying to flip the thing over to prepare, and suddenly she had quills covering her hands.

She was gonna have to speak with Misty about getting these out, and then come back to finish butchering the stupid thing afterwards. She was going to just pull them out herself, but there was something on the end of them that made them hard to remove.

She took a deep breath and used her elbow to open the shed before making her way to the cabin, and tried to keep her tears at bay.

Every shift of her fingers caused more shooting pains through her entire arm as whatever was on the end of the quills shifted inside her hands. She could only imagine it tearing apart whatever microscopic point in her flesh and muscle it hooked into.

She took in slow breaths and thought about how the next porcupine she saw was getting beat to death with a large rock. Shauna could imagine it now. One hit to stun it. Two hits to hear the satisfying crack of its bones. Three to finally bash its brains in and kill it. And then the next dozen to make Shauna feel better.

The door was closed, and she could hear conversation from inside, so she used her boot to kick the bottom and get someone to open it for her.

“Um… who is it?” She heard a voice call back tentatively.

“Open the fucking door!” Shauna shouted. She was two seconds away from breaking the damn thing open with her shoulder. Her hands were killing her.

The door yanked open, and she got a wide-eyed look from everyone inside. It looked like everyone except Travis, Natalie, Mari, and Melissa were there, as they were still hunting.

“Shit! What’s in your hands?!” Van asked with wide eyes from by the fireplace.

Shauna shouldered her way in and her eyes zeroed in on a manically intent Misty. “Help me get these out,” she said through gritted teeth, trying not to scream.

Misty came running up with interest. “Come to the kitchen table. Let me see.”

Shauna wished she didn’t sound like she was more curious about studying her hands rather than treating them, but unfortunately beggars can’t be choosers.

“Can’t we do it somewhere else?” Shauna asked with a scowl.

Jackie stood nearby and glared at her. “Shauna, just sit d—” she stopped herself with what looked herculean effort and took a deep breath. “Can you please just do as Misty asked?”

Shauna looked at her with a furrowed brow, wondering what that was about, but then shook her head and remembered now wasn’t the time. She listened to Jackie’s pleading and went to sit.

Misty looked at her hands curiously after they sat, and when everyone came closer to watch, Shauna snapped, “We don’t need an audience! Go away!”

“Is she usually such a bitch when she’s hurt?” someone grumbled.

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s just in a bad mood,” someone muttered back.

Shauna was going to kill someone.

Something soft ran soothingly through her hair, and she felt annoyed with herself as whatever it was instantly helped to calm a lot of her anger.

She turned, and realized Jackie was behind her, looking down with worried eyes, and what she felt was her running her hand through Shauna’s hair.

Shauna heard a thump from the pantry, and then a panting Javi came running up. “What’s going on?”

Misty spoke up, looking over her aching hands, and trying to figure out how to get them out. “She has something stuck in her hands. I’m not sure what, though.”

Shauna rolled her eyes at the fact Misty didn’t just *ask* her.

Javi stepped closer and winced. “It’s the quills from the porcupine we caught.” He leaned in, and Shauna had to resist snapping at him, too.

Jackie stepped forward and put her hand on his shoulder. “I think Misty needs some space to work. Can you see if anyone needs help with anything?”

He nodded with wide eyes, looking like he was just given a sacred task. “Of course! No problem.”

Jackie smiled and said, “Thanks, Javi. We all appreciate it.” She then sat in the chair next to Shauna.

Shauna looked at her with a raised brow, surprised she was staying.

She ran her hand softly through Shauna’s hair again, and she had to make sure not to close her eyes and whimper at the sensation of nails gently running across her scalp. Jackie looked worried, and kinder than she had in weeks, and the combination of everything had Shauna wondering how obvious it would be if she purposefully started injuring herself in the future.

Misty pulled on a quill, and Shauna let out a pained yelp. It felt like there were tiny rusty hooks being yanked across the inside of her hands.

She stopped pulling and looked down with a grimace. “These will not be easy to get out. Some of them seem deep.”

Akilah nodded from her place by the fireplace. “If it’s from a porcupine, then they have barbs on the end that get bigger and make them harder to remove.”

Misty bit her lip and stared at the quills, and then glanced at Shauna again before sighing. “Can you help me, Akilah? I think you might know more about it.”

Akilah’s eyes widened, and a small smile came to her face. “Of course, no problem, Misty.”

Shauna would need to give Misty a metaphorical cookie later. She was nice to Lottie earlier, and now asking others for help. Hell might’ve frozen over, but at least Misty wasn’t

being difficult.

Jackie's hand in her hair moved to Shauna's thigh and gave it a small squeeze as Misty and Akilah discussed what to do.

"Um, thanks for sitting with me, Jackie," Shauna muttered, looking down with flushed cheeks.

"You seemed upset," she said with a smirk. "So, honestly, this was a favor to everyone."

Shauna nodded and tried not to feel disappointed Jackie was only comforting her out of pragmatism.

"Okay, so we're gonna pull them out at the same angle they went in," Misty said, still staring at the quills with interest. "And it's gonna hurt."

Shauna groaned. She hated porcupines.

"Why didn't this guy have tweezers anywhere?" Misty mumbled to herself.

"I think there are some pliers," Akilah said.

Misty grinned. "Oh! That'll work!"

"Getting these out today would be nice!" Shauna snapped.

She was in a lot of pain, and every second they weren't taking these things out was making her patience grow thinner.

Jackie's left hand went to her hair again, running her fingers through it in a way that almost made Shauna forget about the dozen of needles sticking out of her skin.

"Relax, Shauna." Her warm right hand landed on Shauna's leg to rub her thumb back and forth on it. "They're doing what they can."

She grumbled to herself, but stayed quiet as they worked.

Jackie seemed to have some kind of ability to know when Shauna was about to snap. Anytime Shauna felt like she was going to open her mouth and ask Misty and Akilah—both with pliers and taking a hand—to hurry up, Jackie would pet her hair or stroke her leg.

Shauna kinda felt like a dog, but she also really liked it and didn't want it to stop, so she decided to just be quiet.

When they finished, after what felt like an eternity, Shauna scowled at her wrapped hands. "How long do I have to keep these covered?"

Misty rolled her eyes. "Until you aren't at risk of infection and losing your hands."

She and Akilah left, and Shauna glared at her back.

Jackie squeezed her thigh, and there was a small smirk on her face. "You didn't even say thank you, ya know?"

Shauna tilted her head with furrowed brows, but then just shrugged. She would've told Jackie before she left, but okay. "Oh, um. Thank you."

Jackie covered her face with her hand and laughed.

Shauna stared at her, feeling like she was being laughed at, and there was some annoyance, but she mostly just thought about how much she'd missed hearing Jackie's laughter.

"I meant Akilah and Misty," Jackie said with a small smile. "You didn't even say thank you."

"Oh. Do you want me to…" Shauna resisted groaning. She supposed she should get used to Jackie telling her what to do all the time if she really wanted them to be okay again.

"It's up to you." Jackie shrugged. "Do whatever you want," she said with a sigh.

Shauna stared at her with wide eyes.

Jackie rolled her eyes and said, "Oh, don't give me that look." She turned away with a blush. "I'm, um, trying not to tell people what to do so much. Lottie and Akilah and I get along really well, but they've both snapped at me a bunch of times now for being controlling."

"But, y-you tried to tell me what to do *yesterday,*" Shauna said, not believing this was real life.

Jackie glared at her. "That's because I was worried and upset, Shauna," she snapped. "And I'm not apologizing for that."

Shauna wanted to argue with her, but then she realized Jackie had just admitted she still cared and was worried about her. Her heart felt like it was going to rip out from her chest with how fast it was beating.

She still had to wonder if those quills had something on them to cause her to hallucinate. As it seemed too simple that Jackie just needed other close friends who weren't afraid to tell her when she was annoying them.

"I'm still not the best at remembering I can't control everything, but I've gotten better, I think," Jackie said with a nod. "So, uh, while I think you should probably thank them, I know it's ultimately your decision."

Jackie sounded like she was reciting something from a script, and Shauna wondered if she actually wrote this down somewhere to remember.

Shauna nodded and stood up, dazed. "Okay, I have to go, uh, finish up what I was doing."

Jackie leaped up with furrowed brows. "Do you mean butchering the porcupine?"

"Yeah, who else can do it?" Shauna said with a tired sigh. She'd just have to suck it up so they didn't starve. Maybe get more bandages instead of taking them off as she hoped.

"But—" Jackie started, and Shauna turned to her, waiting for the argument and commands. Her heart sunk. She knew Jackie was lying about this.

Jackie took in a large breath and looked like she was struggling as she said, "Okay, but can you please at least let Misty check your hands when you're done in the shed until they're healed?"

Oh… huh. Well, that was something.

“Okay.” Shauna nodded and stared at Jackie like she had never seen her before. “I—yeah. Okay. Yeah. Uh.”

She was stuttering up a storm and nodding like an idiot under Jackie’s confused stare. The world felt upside down, sideways, and inside out.

Shauna still needed to get the porcupine together after wasting so much time with this, and maybe she needed some time alone to think. Jackie had truly thrown her for a loop.

Shauna walked to the door, but kept glancing back at Jackie, whose confusion was morphing into a small smile and raised brow as she watched her.

She opened it, careful of her hands, and turned back to wave at a smirking Jackie who gave a short playful wave back.

# 11. Journal

"I don't know. It's like we over hunted after only two hunts." Shauna shook her head. "Six animals, and it's already dried up. It doesn't make sense."

It'd been over a week now since they caught anything. Her hands were plenty healed, and she was raring to go, but there was nothing out there except snow, trees, and more snow.

"I told you. The animals here are fucking weird." Natalie sighed.

"Well, Jackie"—Natalie gave her a look— "and fine everyone else, too. Are gonna starve soon." Shauna rolled her eyes.

Of course, she didn't want anyone else to starve either, but if it came down to it, she'd screw all of them over if it meant Jackie got to eat first.

Natalie groaned and leaned back against the wall. "Great, so we're back at square one."

"Well, at leas—"

A loud banging noise came from Ben's room. Shauna straightened. She grabbed her spear by the door, Natalie grabbing the rifle.

She turned and glanced at Jackie hiding near the back, clutching her stomach, and looking nervous. Shauna wanted to go over there and check on her, ask if she was okay and would like to sit down, but she didn't have the time right now.

They locked eyes, and Shauna gave her a reassuring nod, hoping it soothed Jackie.

Shauna and Natalie both made their way closer to the room, as the noises inside grew louder. As they got near the door, they heard a frantic muttering coming from within.

They turned to each other, disturbed, and Shauna knew they'd have each other's back. She let Natalie look in first with the rifle at the ready.

"What the fuck?" Natalie mumbled.

Shauna stepped closer and looked over her shoulder. Coach Ben was in there, tearing the place apart. There was furniture flipped and askew, various knickknacks strewn about, and the cabinet was wide open, with everything inside scattered onto the floor.

The sight of such unhinged and unnecessary chaos left a sour taste in Shauna's mouth. The cabin was the Yellowjackets' sanctuary, so to see it treated in such a way almost felt like sacrilege.

"Where is it? Where is it? Where is it?" he said, panting.

She and Nat met eyes, and she watched as a large uncomfortable grimace crossed her friend's face.

Coach Ben was off his crutches, so he had to use his one leg and strain himself by clutching on to the walls and furniture. His derangement made something about Ben seem

more animal than man.

“Ben!” Misty sprinted forward, and Shauna dropped her weapon to grab her around the middle before she got too close and got hurt.

“Travis! Grab her!” Shauna shouted as Misty continued to struggle. She couldn’t deal with her and this situation, and she trusted Travis and his strength.

He moved forward and grabbed Misty’s arms so she couldn’t try running in again.

“Don’t hurt him! He’s just sick. Like Lottie! He’s not doing anything wrong!” Misty said, with tears streaming down her face.

The sight left Shauna feeling unmoved, and she wondered if it was because of Misty, or because she was talking about Ben. Shauna had always liked him well enough, but she’d still choose any of the others—even Misty, ironically—over him if it came down to it.

“He’s destroying the cabin, Misty!” Tai snapped.

A thump sounded out behind Shauna and she spun around. Coach Ben was laying down on the floor face first, and his breathing had finally slowed. He looked pathetic, and Shauna had to stop her lip from curling at how much he was scaring everyone.

“What happened?” Shauna asked, looking to Natalie, who hadn’t taken her eyes off of him.

Natalie lowered her rifle, looking down at him sadly. “He tripped and fell.” She was the only one who was friends—not whatever the hell Misty was—with him, so Shauna knew this was hard for her to watch.

“Fuck’s sake.” Shauna muttered, rubbing her forehead. She was developing a headache over this. “Is this why you were asking Lottie about therapy stuff, Misty?”

Misty looked down, hiding her face in the flickering shadowing of the candlelight inside.

“I don’t think we’re equipped to deal with whatever the fuck that was!” Tai said as she stomped closer.

Shauna sighed. She agreed with her, but she needed a second to think, and Tai wasn’t helping.

“I say we kick him out,” Melissa said with a shrug.

The thought had been crossing Shauna’s mind for weeks now, so she wasn’t surprised others had come to the same conclusion.

Quite a few heads nodded in agreement, and Misty sobbed again. “He’ll die out there alone! Look at him!”

Shauna glanced in at him and saw what she meant. He looked pitiful as he caught his breath on the ground. She caught Natalie’s eye and raised a brow, wanting to hear her thoughts.

“Misty’s right… he can’t survive out there like this. First his leg, and now his mind,” Natalie said, shaking her head.

Shauna turned to Tai. “What do you think?”

Tai looked in at Ben again. “I like Coach, but this is crazy. What if he wakes up and hurts someone?”

Shauna looked between the two, knowing they both made good points. She wondered why leading seemed to swivel so much between a lot of fun and the shittiest thing you’ll ever experience.

“Let’s just… let’s see what he’s like when he calms down. See if he’s aware, I guess,” Shauna said with a sigh. She would not decide on anything until she got answers about what that was all about.

Misty looked at her with teary-eyed gratitude.

Shauna nodded at Travis and then looked at Misty. “Stay away from him until we figure this out. If I find out you went in there, I’m kicking you *both* out, go it?”

Misty nodded her head up and down rapidly and made herself scarce.

Shauna turned to Natalie and Tai, who closed in with her near the bedroom.

“Are you sure about this, Shauna?” Tai asked with a frown.

Shauna sighed, shaking her head. “No. I don’t know what else to do with him, though.”

Tai frowned at him. “What do you think it is?”

“I don’t think he has what Lottie does,” Shauna muttered.

Something felt different about it. It was like he was trying to be in his own little world to escape this place. Lottie definitely wasn’t having fun in whatever one she went to sometimes. She’d heard about them only after the fact, but she knew Jackie and Akilah had been there for some and tried to help calm her down.

Laura Lee seemed to be who Lottie went to the most for comfort, even after she got involved in the cult. She’d asked Shauna once if she thought Lottie could get visions from The Wilderness, and it was the only time she’d ever snapped at the other girl.

She didn’t need someone out there who might usurp her power, and the last thing Lottie needed was to be told she was having prophetic visions. As far as Shauna knew, Laura Lee had never mentioned it to anyone again.

Tai and Natalie both nodded, agreeing that it seemed pretty different from Lottie’s troubles.

Shauna glanced in, and she noticed he seemed more aware as he tried to sit up. She wanted to get answers, and then drop him off a cliff to be done with this already, but Shauna knew that was just her impulsiveness and frustration talking.

She waved over to Travis, and they all went inside. Shauna crossed her arms, looking down at him. “You wanna tell us what that was?”

He swallowed and sat up with a groan. Ben looked around and shook his head. “I don’t—What happened in here?” His eyes grew wide.

She'd say he was faking it if the panic in his eyes wasn't obvious.

The four of them exchanged glances. "You did," Shauna said. "You wrecked the place. Said 'I can't find it' repeatedly. What is 'it'?"

He looked up at them with furrowed brows. "I don't… I don't remember doing that." He examined the room again. "Did I do anything else?"

Travis sighed. "No, man. Just scared the shit out of all of us."

Shauna narrowed her eyes at Ben. "A lot of people in here want to kick you out. They're afraid of you." She raised a brow. "Why shouldn't we?"

His shoulders slumped, and he looked down with a heavy frown. "I don't know…"

Shauna looked at Natalie. "Any reason we shouldn't?"

Maybe she was feeling extra sympathetic that day, or maybe Shauna just felt like she owed her one with how much Natalie had done for her and the group, but she wanted to give Natalie a chance here.

Natalie gritted her teeth. "You mean besides it just being plain cruel?"

Shauna didn't blink. "Yes, besides that."

She didn't care about what others thought of as cruel or not. She cared about what would make Jackie safest and her and Shauna the most content.

Natalie nodded, thinking. After a few moments, she said, "He still knows more about hunting than us. He's the one who told us how to use the info you got." Natalie raised a brow at Shauna mockingly. "Without that, it would've been a waste of time, just like you thought."

Shauna smirked and rolled her eyes. It was just pragmatic and reasonable enough to convince her. "Well, Coach. Looks like you owe Nat your life."

Ben and Natalie both released a relieved sigh.

"We should still keep an eye on him, though, right?" Tai muttered, so he couldn't hear.

They'd be stupid not to. Shauna nodded and glanced at his crutches. "We're taking the crutches when we sleep until we know you won't hurt anyone."

His face pinched, but finally he nodded. "Okay, yeah. I get it."

Shauna nodded in return and then everyone but Natalie left the room after she handed Travis the rifle to put away.

Tai and Shauna shared a look. Neither of them were thrilled about letting Ben stay, but Natalie had made a good argument.

Shauna sighed, examining the group. Everyone still seemed on edge—uneasy about Ben's continued presence inside. She hoped this would be the end of their problems with him. He wouldn't get another chance. And if he left, that would be one less mouth to feed.

---

She and Javi went out the next day, and Shauna almost started punching the trees when they found nothing out there yet again.

She didn't know what the fuck changed or what they were supposed to do. Jackie needed to eat, and Shauna did too, so she could stay with Jackie.

They were on the last of their food supply. The bear and small game had dried up so fast, she had to wonder if it even made a difference at all.

Shauna was planning for worst-case scenarios.

Were they going to be fighting over scraps soon? Or should Shauna be using someone as bait, like she'd considered?

There was the nuclear option, of course. The one she's sure many of them had contemplated, but would never admit to aloud.

Were they gonna be like one of those survival stories you hear about where people get stranded somewhere and they all go crazy and eat each other?

Well, there's not going to be any food to fight over soon, and The Wilderness seemed pissed at Shauna now. So if Jackie ever needed it, truly needed it, Shauna would play eeny, meeny, miny, moe, and stab and cook whoever loses.

She had to wonder what would happen next, though. Would Shauna just have to kill and kill again to feed Jackie and herself until it was just the two of them left? What then? Jackie wouldn't know how to prepare Shauna's dead body correctly, and she'd be on her own too.

What they really needed was to get the fuck out of there. Unfortunately, Shauna had no clue how to make that happen, so for now, surviving as long as possible was their only option.

——

It was a few days later. Their rations were down to its last legs, and Shauna was contemplating the nuclear options again. So far, things inside had been tense with the lack of food, everyone getting prickly.

Ben at least seemed to be doing better. Shauna thought maybe seeing the result of his actions helped him snap back to himself.

She wished she could speak to Jackie more than the semi awkward greetings they give each other in the morning. She couldn't though, as Shauna's been running herself ragged all over this stupid forest looking for food. It got to where Travis practically had to beg her to take a break for Javi's sake.

So she had a few hours to spare now, and Shauna decided to write in her journal in the shed. Then she would check on Jackie when she finished.

**Yes:**

*Travis (do not treat like dog. blessed.)*

*Natalie (sarcasm. pro Ben)*

*Van (makes Tai happy :) )*

*Mari (annoying but trying. small game hunter)*

*Akilah (nice. good at stitching. Jackie's friend)*

*Melissa (hat. small game hunter. anti Ben)*

*Misty (crazy. pro Ben.)*

*Laura Lee (enjoys prayer. slightly deluded)*

*Javi (small game hunter. blessed)*

*Other JV girls (learn names)*

**No:**

*Lottie (mental health issues. Jackie's friend)*

*Tai (nonbeliever. annoyed. my friend. anti Ben)*

*Ben (talking to himself. ~6'0. one leg. banish?)*

She flipped back through pages until she found what she was looking for and then looked down to the bottom where she started writing about her more recent thoughts.

**Jackie:**

*Less angry lately. Too thin. Having trouble staying awake. Looks pretty today. Convince to comb hair with fingers again. Check if okay when possible. Tell her something nice.*

Shauna stared down with furrowed brows and made a new list.

**Nice Things:**

*Hair looks good even unwashed.*

*Freckles.*

*Smells good even when sweaty.*

*Smells good especially when sweaty.*

*Want to lick swea*

The opening of the door distracted Shauna as she was in the middle of writing, and she smiled as she saw Jackie, happy she ended up finding her instead.

Shauna's smile fell as she noticed their dwindling food shortage had caused Jackie to lose the few pounds she had regained. She had to stop herself from walking into the cabin and forcing them to draw straws for who got to be the first to feed Jackie.

Jackie stood in the open doorway and a small frown came to her face when she noticed Shauna was sitting on the ground with her journal.

"What are you doing?" Her eyes zeroed in on Shauna and examined her like she wanted to make sure she wasn't seeing things.

Shauna raised her journal up in the air and shook it around. “Writing. Come inside, it’s cold.”

Jackie’s eyes brightened as she let the door close behind her and examined Shauna with slow, curious eyes. “I still don’t understand why you journal out here.” She walked closer and stood over her. “Why would you want to document this terrible stuff?”

Shauna tapped her fingers on her journal as she thought, and Jackie shuffled her feet as she waited. It was a fair question, she supposed, and Jackie wouldn’t know she used up a lot of her journal space for planning and to make sure she didn’t forget anything useful, too.

Finally, Shauna looked up at her. “It’s not just for that.”

“What else is it for, then?” she asked, looking just as interested as she always did in Shauna’s journals.

Jackie hadn’t ever read one, but Shauna could tell she always had to restrain herself from asking.

Her fingers ran across the cover once, and then she put it down and stood up next to Jackie. Her hand was cradling her stomach again, something she had started unconsciously doing a lot more lately.

Shauna did her best not to glare at it, especially since Jackie would probably take it personally. She’d just never thought she could hate something as much as she did the thing leeching off Jackie’s life. Shauna wished it would disappear.

She put her hand on the small of Jackie’s back and ignored how she jolted in surprise. “Sit down, and I’ll show you.”

Jackie turned to her with wide eyes, shock freezing on her face. Shauna was soothed by the knowledge Jackie understood this wasn’t to be taken lightly.

She nodded, and didn’t even protest when Shauna helped her sit on the ground, looking up at her afterward like it was the first time she saw her in months.

Shauna collapsed next to her with a sigh, and let their knees touch. She opened it to the page documenting everyone, not feeling as protective of it compared to most of her inner thoughts. “Here,” she said, handing it over.

Her heart was already going wild, and her palms were sweating. Just seeing someone looking at something so a part of herself made her nerves ratchet up.

Jackie took it gently, holding it like it was an ancient artifact that must be handled with the utmost care. Her hand ran down the page, caressing it like it really was a part of Shauna she wanted to cherish.

The gentleness had Shauna feeling like Jackie was stroking her own soul—like watching her act so cautiously towards Shauna’s prized possession would transfer to her very being too.

She started reading, her eyes flickering, and a smile coming to her lips as she went down the list on the page. “I feel like most of this you should know without having to keep notes about it, Shauna.”

“But what if I forget Melissa is the one with the hat and Misty is the crazy one?” Shauna asked with a playful smile as she raised her knees up, put her chin on them, and wrapped her arms around her legs.

Jackie frowned deeply. “If you forget Misty’s the crazy one, you have more problems than a journal can help with,” she said, rereading it slowly, as if Shauna had added more notes while she’d been distracted.

Shauna hummed and stayed quiet, letting Jackie look the page over as much as she wanted. Jackie’s calm reaction soothed a lot of her anxiety.

“‘Jackie’s friend,’ huh?” She looked at Shauna out of the corner of her eye with the ghost of a smile on her lips.

“I just wanted to make note of it,” she muttered, face heating. She forgot about those little additions, but it was too late to take it back now. Jackie’s reaction seemed more amused and fond, at least, rather than uncomfortable.

“I notice I’m not on the page. Why’s that?” Jackie asked, playing with the paper’s edge like she was going to flip it. Shauna had to lock her limbs to prevent herself from tearing it from her grasp, as her unease increased again.

“You have your own page,” Shauna mumbled, feeling like she was confessing to Jackie that she had a shrine dedicated to her somewhere and not just a page in her journal she started after their falling out.

Jackie grinned, eyes wide and excited, expression almost as bright as she’d expect it to be pre-crash. “Can I see it?”

Shauna’s blood pressure spiked, and she finally lost her composure. She ripped the journal away from Jackie and back into her arms, hiding it between her legs and chest. “No!”

Jackie’s arms were still in the air, like she was miming holding the journal.

Her smile faded, replaced by a stunned look—like Shauna just slapped her. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just curious.” She bowed her head, crossing her arms protectively over herself.

Shauna’s fingers tightened around the journal. She squeezed her eyes shut, frustrated with herself as she noticed how Jackie was hiding her face from her.

That was such a stupid overreaction. Jackie had even asked her for permission. Shauna just panicked thinking about her reading something embarrassing.

“No. I-it’s fine.” Shauna sighed and twisted so she faced her and could hide what was in her journal. She wanted to make it up to her and wipe the sadness away before Shauna started offering things that were much less frivolous, like a limb or an organ. She flipped to her ‘Jackie’ page. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Jackie’s face lifted and smoothed out, looking curious again as she watched Shauna go through her pages. “What are you doing?”

“I’ll um.” She looked up and quickly down again when she saw Jackie’s expression was that penetrating stare she liked to give Shauna sometimes where she looked like she wanted to

eat Shauna alive and savor every bite. “I’ll read you something.”

“Okay,” Jackie said in a soft voice.

“Um, okay.” Shauna kept her eyes locked on her journal. “Looked happy this morning. Sewing has improved a lot. Had tea twice throughout the day. Um, looks pretty. Worried about how thin she’s getting. Need more food.”

Shauna was afraid to lift her head, embarrassed over how much thought she put into Jackie in only one day.

Jackie stayed silent, and Shauna grew more and more nervous by the second.

Finally, she heard Jackie let out a small huff of laughter. “You’re so weird, Shipman.”

Shauna’s head whipped up. Jackie’s eyes were red and watering again, but she also had a small smile on her face and was looking at Shauna like she just killed an animal with her bare hands for her and hand fed her each individual piece.

But that wasn’t even the thing that had Shauna’s heart pounding and brain going to mush. Jackie hadn’t called her Shipman in weeks. She felt like crying again. Then she felt stupid that one name from Jackie made her feel like crying again.

Jackie reached forward and closed her journal, putting it to the side. “I’m still so furious with you.” Shauna’s face dropped, and Jackie tucked some hair behind Shauna’s ear. “But after hearing your stalker ramblings about me. And…” she trailed off and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Point is, I think maybe I’ll be able to forgive you one day.”

Her first thought was to be offended that Jackie thought she needed to be forgiven in the first place, but then Shauna realized she had the chance to get everything she wanted, and for once in her life, got out of her own way, and kept her mouth firmly shut about it.

Shauna turned her face away with a furious blush. “They’re not stalker ramblings…” she grumbled, trailing off.

Jackie laughed. “Of course that’s what you got from that.” She put her hands in the air. “Help me up.”

Shauna scrambled up and helped her to her feet. She stood, and there were only inches between them. Jackie’s eyes went to her lips, and Shauna wondered if she’d finally kiss in her a way that didn’t seem like it was screaming how much she hated her.

She closed her eyes without realizing it, and the breath on her face increased. A moment passed, and then she felt warm lips on her forehead. “I’ll see you later, Shipman.”

The kiss was so much more gentle than most things she’d gotten from Jackie lately. Sometimes, Shauna thought she always just wanted what she couldn’t have, but finally getting it from Jackie made her want more, more, more.

Shauna didn’t open her eyes until she heard the door close behind her.

## 12. Coach

It was a slightly warmer day, which really only meant Shauna and Javi didn't have to cover their faces while hunting.

They wandered the forest for hours, to the point Javi was huffing and puffing alongside Shauna. If she didn't make so much noise, she'd probably be sprinting to check the next location, and then the next.

Her arms and legs had somehow packed on muscle even with the lack of nutrients, but her sunken in cheeks and visible ribs meant her body was just taking it from other places.

She could barely believe she and Javi—and all the others who trudged through this hell hole daily—had the energy to do so.

Shauna knew what drove her. The thoughts spun in her mind like a whirlpool—Jackie. Survival. Jackie. Survival. Jackie.

She felt like a cornered animal protecting itself and its mate. Like she was turning savage, and one last thing would finally tip her over the edge to attack. The hunger, the worry, the stress, and then one blank line waiting to be filled in so she'd finally detonate.

The sky was getting dark, and it was the latest she and Javi had ever been out. The lack of sun made that tiny extra warmth disappear.

Javi looked up and then nervously glanced at her. "We should head back now, right?"

Shauna also glanced up, to the sun making its last descent and the pinks, purples, and blues on the horizon. She released a large breath through her nose, but she nodded, making Javi sigh in relief.

The way back to the cabin wasn't long, but they both stumbled and tripped more than usual for themselves as the night laughingly hid their path.

Shauna made her way over a big fallen branch, grumbling over the lack of animals, but whipped her head back at a gasp.

Javi's shoe caught, and he went down hard, falling face first into a tree trunk. Blood flew immediately. Some of it splattered onto Shauna's cheek, the same one that held her bullet graze scar.

She cursed and jolted forward, grabbing a groaning Javi before he could fully fall to the floor, and then helped him sit without hurting himself.

There were tears already falling, and crimson poured from his nose. Shauna could see he was trying to appear strong and hold it together, but it wasn't working well as he pulled his face away.

"Let me see!" She kneeled down and grabbed his wiggling chin, bringing his face close to squint at in the low light. "Javi! Stop! Let me see." She brushed his hands away before he

could make it worse.

His nose looked slightly crooked and there was a deep cut on top. She cursed again under her breath and let out a deep sigh.

Javi's tears increased, and he wasn't able to hold in his little hiccups. He looked even younger than usual, and Shauna felt oddly maternal seeing him like this.

"Alright, Javi. It'll be fine," she said, voice gentling. "We're almost back, and then Misty can fix you up. It'll be okay."

She nodded at him and squeezed his shoulder while helping him up. Shauna then grabbed his hand to pull him along as she started moving again.

"It's not bad?" he asked in a nasally voice.

"No, it'll be okay. C'mon." She pulled him forward faster, knowing they were only minutes away from the cabin.

Shauna sighed. It could've been worse. A broken nose wasn't the end of the world.

He was sniveling behind her as she led him through the forest, now more careful to help him over any obstacles.

With her new pace, it didn't take them long at all to reach the cabin, and she could've kissed the ground it stood on as she saw the full moon shining above it.

They both released their own sighs of relief at the sight, and she turned back to check on him once again, finding him with a bloody, teary face, but much calmer than he'd been before.

Shauna and Javi practically sprinted to the door, and she squeezed his hand before opening it and finally letting him go.

The atmosphere inside was jovial. Van was in the middle of telling a story that had everyone laughing. The inside was much warmer than the biting cold they just fought through to come in, and the light from the fireplace made it all seem oddly homey considering where they were.

They turned at the door opening. Most of them with welcoming smiles.

Javi stepped forward, and she heard a gasp.

Footsteps stomped across the cabin as Travis ran closer. He grabbed Javi's shoulders and looked at him with wild eyes. "What happened?"

He turned and glared at Shauna, and her eyes widened. They'd become friends. Travis was her first follower, but she should've realized it would always be Javi as his priority, even over his loyalty to her.

Shauna breathed out heavily and tried to keep calm. "It was an accident. He's fine."

"Fine? He's covered in blood," Travis said, pulling Javi closer and gripping his shoulder so hard his knuckles turned white. He looked two seconds from grabbing Javi and bolting.

Jackie stepped near and looked between them with a frown. She used her captain voice—the commanding, no nonsense one—as she said, “Travis, let her explain what happened.”

“Stay out of it!” He turned to Jackie with a snarl—like a lion protecting its young.

Jackie flinched, and an inferno blazed through Shauna’s body.

She shot forward, shoving him. “Don’t talk to her that way!”

He stumbled back a couple of steps, but easily stood back up straight to glare at her again. Shauna wished she had punched him instead.

A commotion happened to her left, but her attention didn’t waver from Travis as they had a battle of wills.

“You were supposed to protect him!” he snapped, a furious glare fixed on Shauna.

“It’s just a fucking nosebleed!” Shauna said with gritted teeth.

He tried to grab at his brother’s face to look at it. “I should’ve never trusted you to look after him.”

His words made her chest twinge with hurt. His continuous assumptions and accusations added more emotions to the pile she already had trouble fitting inside.

Javi glared and angrily pushed Travis’ hands from his face. “Shauna didn—”

A weight slammed into Shauna’s side. “What did you do to Paul?” came a shout into her ear.

She yelled out in surprise as she stumbled into the wall beside the door.

“Ben! Stop!” someone called.

Shauna looked up with wide eyes as she realized it was Ben pushing her against the wall, his crutches lying close behind him. He looked at her like he didn’t know she was there.

“What the fuck?” Shauna said, looking at him with shock. She hadn’t even noticed him until then. She caught his blank stare and cursed herself. Shauna should’ve known he wouldn’t just magically get better.

Travis came forward, all issues forgotten at the sight of Ben trying to hurt Shauna. He tried to get him off, but Ben pushed him away before he could get a grip.

Another person stepped forward, and her eyes widened in panic. It was Jackie. She looked furious in a way Shauna had never seen from the other girl before in all of their years of friendship.

Shauna’s heart was in her throat as she watched her get closer to Ben in his deranged state. Jackie’s eyes were lasered in on him hurting Shauna like nothing else mattered.

“Jackie, back up!” she snapped, terrified.

Ben shoved Jackie away in the same way he did with Travis. Her feet tangled together, turning her body so it was her front that would hit the floor first.

The noises of the cabin silenced for Shauna. The only sound she heard was the *thump thump* of her heart that got louder and faster by the second.

Jackie's body fell face forward, her seven-month pregnant belly sticking out further than anything else. Jackie's head turned to the side as she dropped, so Shauna couldn't see her face. She was grateful she wouldn't have to see the expression about to cross it.

Her body landed on the wooden floor, and Shauna imagined that the entire foundation shook at such a show of disrespect.

The heart pounding in her ears beat so fast and wild that the sound strung together into one *ththump* as she stared at Jackie's unmoving body with wide panicked eyes.

Shauna stopped breathing, wasn't even able to blink, and it was like time followed her example as she became suspended in one drawn out moment of terrifying stillness.

A loud cry went out from where Jackie lay sprawled. Sound snapped back into place.

Tai and Van hurried to help Jackie up. Shauna turned her head back to a snarling Ben.

He looked half feral.

"Get off her! Someone help Shauna!" Jackie yelled, sounding pained—like she had trouble getting the words out.

Shauna was shaking. Someone was trying to pull Ben off as he leaned his full weight onto her. Others rushed to check on Jackie. Others went to Javi. It was pure chaos.

The image of him shoving Jackie ran on a loop in Shauna's mind. The sound of Jackie hitting the floor filled every facet of Shauna's thoughts.

The emotions inside her body finally ran out of space to fit.

Shauna and Ben locked eyes one last time, and hers narrowed into a dark glare. She kneed Ben as hard as she could, not in his groin, but right in the stump where his leg used to be. She knew it had never healed right and made him suffer from sensitivity and chronic pain.

He stumbled back, shouting in agony. But it was nothing. It wasn't satisfying. One shout wouldn't make up for putting a finger on Jackie.

Shauna flew forward and tackled him to the ground, using his one leg to her advantage by twisting him to her right. Her first punch flew before he even hit the ground. And her second soon after.

And then she was in a haze. One, two, three, four… someone tried to grab her. She turned and snarled at them—Shauna was the feral one now. No one touched her after that.

She heard every crunch and every break of his face. Her knuckles ached, but it still wasn't enough. Shauna wanted his face so far caved in that he wouldn't be recognizable. She wanted his head turned to mush, his body turned to ash, his soul turned over to hell where he belonged.

Shauna stood, and she kicked him and kicked him. And at the moment, it was just her and Ben. She saw nothing except the prey beneath her she decided needed to be put down.

Her kicks grew weaker as she tired. Somehow, he was still alive, gasping for breath. But Shauna wouldn't let him live. She wouldn't let *anyone* who hurt Jackie live.

Her bloody, aching hands grabbed his crutch. She didn't care what she looked like, or what this may cause, or who this man used to be to her. All she cared about was getting rid of this threat.

She held the crutch in a white knuckled grip, and then it was just how she imagined she'd kill the next porcupine that crossed her path.

One hit to stun. The crutch slammed into his gut. He choked on his own plasma, stopping his groaning.

Two hits to hear the satisfying crack of its bones. She hit him on the knee, making the crutch vibrate in her hands from the impact. The bone shattered, making his one good leg useless.

Three to bash its brains in and kill it. The crutch went down towards his face, and the sound of his coughing and groaning finally stopped.

And then the next dozen to make Shauna feel better. She slammed it down on him again and again until she was out of breath, and her hands hurt from gripping the crutch so hard.

Her arms ached worse than they ever had. Worse than a day of hunting. Worse than soccer practice.

When she was finally done, she panted, staring at the unmoving, dead corpse. A drop of blood fell onto its chest from her face, and the tacky feeling on her skin told her it wasn't coming from her body, but was instead a leftover remnant of the cadaver in front of her.

Many more drops on her face and clothes had joined the splatter from Javi's nose. She felt over a dozen eyes glued to her form as the crackling of the fire and her heavy panting were the only sounds left inside.

Her too big emotions were no longer filling her to the brim. The typical relief that she always experienced after a blow up consumed her, and looking at the misshapen lump sluggishly leaking onto their sanctuary's floor, she felt her familiar friends of thrill and satisfaction accompanying it.

Shauna turned and opened the door. She knew what she needed to do, even if no one else could admit it yet. Her eyes caught the stars that always burned so brightly out there.

With her back still turned, she said, "Bring the body outside and then clean this up."

Then she walked out, letting the door slam behind her.

She didn't have to walk far before finding what she was looking for. Her legs collapsed from under her as she fell to her knees and put her hands into the nearby snow with a hiss of her breath.

Her dirty, sullied hands cleansed themselves in the freezing snow, washing away the gore until it was only the powder beneath that looked wounded and red.

The cold was soothing to her shaking, half mangled hands.

She hesitated, and then quickly grabbed a handful of snow to wash her face. Shauna gritted her teeth at the biting cold, but she needed to make all of herself clean.

After she wiped away the moisture from her face with her sleeve, she stared down at her fists again.

Shauna knew she didn't regret killing Ben, or ordering them to bring him out to chop up and serve on a platter like he was their Thanksgiving dinner.

He deserved it for hurting Jackie. It wasn't her problem that he hadn't been himself lately.

Her hands shook, and she swallowed. She ignored the few stray tears dripping down her face. The wind must be making her eyes water.

She unclenched and clenched her stiff, aching fists, trying to stretch them out, but she knew from prior experience that the best thing she could do was leave them alone.

Shauna took a deep wobbly breath. She just needed a moment to get her head on straight, then she'd be perfectly fine to butcher the man who helped her with her footwork every week.

The door slammed open behind her, and Shauna whipped around to see a panting Taissa avoiding her eye.

"Shauna, you need to come in. It's—"

A loud, horrible cry of pain went out from inside. It sounded like someone whose entire insides were being ripped apart. It was the sound of someone who was contemplating letting themselves die if it meant the pain would stop.

Shauna's heart stopped. Then it started pounding faster than ever before.

"Jackie!" she called out, shoving past Tai and sprinting in.

## 13. Bite

There were two pools of blood in the cabin at the moment. One, to Shauna's left, had a corpse lying over it. The other, to her right, was empty.

The sight of that second one made Shauna feel like her heart was being stabbed with a knife someone left outside in the freezing cold.

She had to catch her breath before she could notice that from the second pool there led a trail of red moving deeper inside.

It was that she followed, like a wolf stalking its prey.

She reached Be-Coach's room as Misty was moving to the foot of the bed where Jackie had her legs up and a blanket over her knees for modesty.

Shauna made it to a panting, crying Jackie's side and practically slid down next to her with how fast she was running.

"What's happening?" she snapped at a shaken Misty who refused to meet Shauna's eye.

A hand clutched hers, so tight it cut off her circulation, and made her wince at how it pressed against her new bruises.

She turned to see Jackie looking up at her. "Shauna," she whimpered, tears streaking down her face, face scrunched into a pained terror—looking like she feared for her life. The expression made Shauna *ache.*

Shauna moved her face in close and pressed their foreheads together. Jackie was already burning up and sweaty. "It's okay, Jax. Whatever's happening, Misty will fix it, okay?"

She turned her head to see a wide eyed Misty stood between Jackie's raised legs, looking like she was on another plane of existence with how blank her stare was.

Shauna shook watching her. From equal parts rage and fear. She moved toward Misty, and Jackie cried out at the loss of closeness.

She drew her hand back and slapped Misty. "I don't care what your problem is! Snap the fuck out of it and help her! Now!" There was a stinging pain in her hand, and a red mark on Misty's cheek.

Misty's eyes cleared, and she swallowed. Her shoulders drew back, and she nodded. Shauna made her way back to Jackie's side.

She grabbed the hand desperately reaching out for her, and wiped the tears away as Jackie sobbed. "Now, can someone tell me what the fuck is going on? She's not due for two months."

Tai gave Shauna a piece of fabric with a shaking hand, and said, "Wh-when Ben pushed her down, she hit her stomach. And i-it did something with the placenta—"

“The impact caused the placenta to detach from the uterus. It’ll be like premature labor,” Misty said with clinical detachment.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Shauna shouted. Everything Misty just said went in one ear and out the other. She was way too panicked to remember their sex-ed classes right now.

“Do you want a science lesson or do you want me to help, Jackie?” Misty said, looking at her with an icy glare.

Shauna gritted her teeth. Misty was right.

“Okay, what do we do?” Shauna said, as she used what Tai handed her to wipe the tears and sweat from Jackie’s face.

“Jackie, push. I know it hurts, but you have to push.”

Misty looked up at Akilah, and Shauna’s eyes darted around. She hadn’t even noticed anyone else was there until that moment.

Tai, Akilah, and Lottie stood nearby. Akilah was helping Misty and trying to tell Jackie anything she could think of that would be comforting. Lottie was on Jackie’s other side, letting her clutch on to her hand.

Shauna glanced at Tai, wondering why she was there. It took her a moment, and then she realized—it was for Shauna.

She looked up at her, grateful that she was her friend, and nodded. Tai could meet her eyes again, and that gave Shauna a small amount of comfort during her current panic. She nodded in return.

Shauna turned her attention back to Jackie, and a loud piercing scream ripped through the other girl’s throat. She reached forward and wiped her face again without hesitation.

She needed to be strong for Jackie. She knew she needed to be strong for Jackie.

But Shauna really wanted to cry right now.

Jackie threw her head back, her face turning red, and her grip on Shauna’s hand was so tight, Shauna feared Jackie might break it.

“Push, Jackie! You need to push!” Misty shouted over her screams.

“I am! I am!” she turned her bleary gaze on Shauna and sobbed. “Shauna, please, it hurts. Make it stop. Please!”

Shauna finally lost her control, and her eyes started watering as she leaned closer. “As soon as you get it out, it’ll stop hurting. It’ll be okay. I’m right here.”

She brushed Jackie’s bangs from her face and another scream tore through Jackie’s body.

“It won’t stop. The pain won’t stop!” Jackie sobbed. “Why won’t it stop!”

“Your body is trying to expel the fetus. The contractions won’t stop until it does,” Misty said, like she was answering a question asked by a teacher.

Shauna breathed out slowly to calm down, as she had the urge to choke Misty to death for her shitty bedside manner. Unfortunately, she was the only one there who knew what they were doing.

A few minutes passed before a look of overwhelming relief appeared on Misty's face.

"Okay, the placenta is out! That's good!" Misty's eyes widened. "Oh… um…"

Jackie turned to Shauna, opened her mouth to speak, but a scream cut her off.

Misty and Akilah were both looking down with wide eyes.

"What?" Shauna shouted, terrified by the looks in their eyes.

"N-Nothing! Just k-keep pushing, Jackie." Misty said, sharing a glance with Akilah that Shauna couldn't interpret.

Jackie screamed again. "Why is it getting worse? You said it'd stop!"

Her face was getting pale, and Misty needed to fix this. Now.

"Um, Tai, go get her something to bite down so she doesn't crack a tooth or something," Misty said, grimacing. Much more cautious than she'd been a few minutes ago.

"Misty, what is happening?" Shauna gritted out. Her heart was gonna explode from how much panic was circling around her body right now.

"I just, uh, don't want her to hurt herself," Misty said, sharing another glance with Akilah.

"Shauna," Jackie whimpered into her ear, making her feel like she was going to cry with how useless she felt.

She needed to do something. She needed to help somehow.

Misty said something to Shauna, but she couldn't understand anything. It sounded like gibberish.

The world felt like it was underwater. A chill went down Shauna's spine. It was like someone just walked across her grave. Sound drowned out. Everything became muted and blurry around the edges. Shauna couldn't breathe.

Then, it was like a voice whispered right into her ear.

*Your blood. Your blood. Your blood. Your blood. Your blood.*

Shauna gasped loud and sudden.

The world came back into focus, and she felt like she could get air into her lungs again. Her heart was still pounding, but it was slowing to a point she didn't fear for her life.

Lottie, still holding Jackie's hand across from her, had wide, worried eyes. "Shauna, you're having a panic attack. You need to breathe."

Shauna shook her head wildly. She was fine. More importantly, she knew what she needed to do now.

She leaned to get as close as possible without hurting her, grabbed Jackie's head, and pulled it to her neck. "Bite me."

"Shauna, we don't have time for you to be fucking weird right now!" Tai said while coming in with whatever she could find for Jackie to bite down.

Shauna ignored her. "Now, Jackie. As hard as you can."

She didn't know what it would do. She just had the overwhelming need to help Jackie however she could.

And be it some supernatural force of The Wilderness, her own mental illness, or tiredness and hunger making her delirious, something deep inside told Shauna spilling her blood would do that.

Jackie's body tensed in agony, and then there was an excruciating pain in Shauna's neck. She grunted and used her loose hand to grab the metal frame of the bed and squeeze it.

The pain felt like relief. The blood dripping down her neck and darkening her clothes felt like sacrifice.

Finally, Shauna was doing something. Even if it was just offering her own flesh to prevent Jackie from hurting herself, it was *something*, and that's all that mattered.

She could feel Jackie's stuttering breath from her nose against her skin. The teeth at her neck would loosen and clamp down in waves as the pain ripped through Jackie.

At one point, Jackie released hers and Lottie's hand to wrap her arms around Shauna in whatever way she could.

Shauna wasn't sure how long she stayed in that awkward position, but soon enough Jackie clamped down on her neck harder than ever before, so hard Shauna thought she was going to actually tear a chunk out.

Fat tears fell from Shauna's eyes, the pain ratcheting up even more, but she knew it still wasn't a tenth as bad as it was for Jackie right now.

She gripped the metal bed frame harder as Misty excitedly cried out, "It's out! The worst part is over."

There was a haunting silence after her words. Its presence after so many long minutes of Jackie's loud cries and screams made it even more eerie.

Tai hesitantly spoke up from beside Shauna, "Is it-are they, uhh…"

She had to wonder why Tai even asked. Could no one else hear the quiet?

"It's not… no." Misty looked down. "The fetus is stillborn. B-Ben's shove it…"

The confirmation of what Shauna assumed to be the inevitable when she absorbed the words "trauma" and "due in two months" made a large jumble of emotions flare in Shauna's chest. They ranged from softer emotions one would expect to have in these circumstances, to harsher guilt inducing ones that Shauna felt compelled to keep hidden.

“Right.” Tai interrupted, clenching her jaw. “I got it.” Shauna wondered if Taissa was feeling all the normal emotions you should when something like this happened.

Misty took a large breath and said, “Jackie, do you, um, do you want to know what the sex was?”

Shauna made sure not to tense at the question. She wasn’t sure what she wanted the answer to be, but Shauna knew she didn’t want anyone else to influence Jackie’s choice.

Jackie’s mouth finally released from Shauna’s neck.

Shauna grunted. The pain had felt comforting and familiar. To lose it left her feeling cold.

Jackie’s head frantically shook in the negative as much as she could from where she still hid in Shauna’s neck.

“Do you want me to ask them to get it out of here so you don’t have to see it?” Shauna whispered. Jackie nodded, trembling and quick. “Okay, close your eyes, and don’t move your head, Jax.”

The question was partially selfish. She’d liked it removed before she laid eyes on it too, but she could only imagine how Jackie felt.

“Someone take it away. She doesn’t want to see it,” Shauna said, also keeping her eyes down.

There was some murmuring and shuffling. And then Misty spoke again, “Alright’s uh i-it’s gone.”

“Thank you.” Shauna stroked Jackie’s hair. Her breaths had slowed, she had fallen asleep almost immediately. “Is there anything else we need to do?”

Misty sighed. “No, she was lucky, actually. The second wave of bleeding stopped pretty fast.”

Shauna tensed and had to stop herself from whipping around and dislodging Jackie. “Bleeding?”

For how long? How much? When? Why? Does this mean anything for the future? Will Jackie still be okay?

“Yeah. It stopped soon after she bit you, actually…” Misty trailed off thoughtfully. “She still needs to be monitored, but the worst part is over.”

The words filled her with a modicum of relief, but she knew she’d still have a small kernel of fear until Jackie fully recovered.

Shauna sighed. “Okay.”

Misty walked toward the door, everyone else having already vacated the room.

“And uh, Misty?” She stroked her hand up and down Jackie’s back. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Misty said, in an uncommonly subdued tone. She paused at the door, hesitating.

Shauna stared at her back, trying to be patient so she could organize her thoughts.

“I—” she cut herself off and took a large breath, starting again, “Come get me when she wakes up.” Shauna wondered what she stopped herself from saying, but it wasn’t the time to pry.

Shauna nodded and said, “Okay,” as the door clicked shut.

She was gentle as she dislodged Jackie from around her and set her on the bed.

Shauna looked down at her and ran her fingers across her cheek. She felt a new certain type of softness for Jackie that she hadn’t before. Seeing her in so much pain and anguish, it made Shauna want to treat her as delicately as a piece of glass.

Her lips twitched up, thinking about how Jackie would love the attention.

Along with this new tenderness, Shauna felt an overwhelming fierce protectiveness that put anything she’d experienced before to shame. Having watched Jackie go through that agony, and being terrified so many times that she was about to lose her, put so much in perspective for Shauna.

Shauna sighed, and leaned down to put her lips to Jackie’s sweaty forehead, pausing in the action to breathe Jackie in and remind herself she still had a beating heart.

She sat on the floor and leaned against the bed, her head tipping onto the mattress by Jackie’s chest.

Shauna closed her eyes, the small breaths coming from Jackie lulling her to sleep.

## 14. Bowl

Shauna woke up to fingers running through her hair. She enjoyed the sensation, almost falling back asleep with how soothing and gentle it was, but a voice spoke up before she could.

“Why are you on the floor?” Jackie asked quietly. She was on her side with her head resting on the pillow, looking down at Shauna, whose head was uncomfortably propped onto the mattress.

“It’s a small bed. I didn’t wanna get in your way, or hurt you somehow,” Shauna said, just as quietly.

The moment felt like a time to whisper.

Jackie lifted the blanket on the bed and rolled over, leaving her back to Shauna and a space behind her.

Shauna stared at the empty spot. A mixture of happiness and worry blooming into her chest.

“Well?” Jackie said, subdued, but still sounding impatient.

Shauna smiled at the tone, and climbed in next to her, being careful to put her arms around Jackie’s chest instead of her stomach.

She enjoyed the subtle softness in Jackie’s bony limbs and body, and breathed in the smell of *Jackie. S*omehow, she always smelled slightly sweet, and it was Shauna’s favorite scent.

“Okay?” she whispered.

Jackie nodded, and they both fell back asleep.

---

“Right now she needs rest more than anything, but…” Misty clenched her fists and stared down at her shoes.

Shauna let her think and looked back into the room that held a sleeping Jackie.

“She needs water an-an-and—” Misty’s lips started wobbling. Shauna held in her sigh.

“Food,” Shauna said, careful to keep her expression blank. Misty’s eyes shot up to her. “That’s what she needs, right?”

Misty wrung her hands together and swallowed. “Yes,” she said quietly.

“Then I think we both know what I need to do.” Shauna looked back inside, having an intense need to make sure Jackie was okay as much as possible now.

“Can—” Misty bit her lip, and Shauna looked back at her with a small frown and raised brow, wondering if this was going to be a fight. “Can I be there? When you do it?”

Shauna’s eyes widened. That had been the last thing she’d have expected Misty to say, but then again, Misty always managed to shock everyone.

“Are you sure you want to do that, Misty?” Shauna grimaced, hoping she’d reconsider. She didn’t think anyone else could handle this but especially not Misty with Ben.

Misty swallowed, and then stopped staring at her shoes to look at Shauna, flinty eyed. “Thank you for your concern, but I know what I can and can’t handle, Shauna,” she said, tone turning haughty.

Unfortunately for Misty, she couldn’t hide the glossiness of her eyes.

Shauna raised a brow, seeing right through her facade. She studied her face for a few more seconds and then shrugged. “Okay, but don’t get in my way while I’m working.”

Misty nodded back, serious, and they both walked through the cabin to the front door together.

They went past the people staring at them, past the cleaned area near the front door that had a large stain they couldn’t get out, and away from Jackie, who slept, unaware of what was about to happen.

Van stopped Shauna a few steps from the front door, furrowing her brow at Misty before looking back at Shauna with a shake of her head. “Are you… are you sure? There’s gotta be another way, right?”

“There isn’t,” a voice said before Shauna could. They both turned to find Mari sitting by the fireplace with her arms around her knees. “There’s nothing out there anymore. Melissa and I have looked everywhere, Shauna and Javi finding food must’ve just been flukes.”

Mari whipped her head up and stared at them. “And I trust Shauna and her abilities. If this is what she says is best, then it must be true.” She nodded, slightly frantic. And then looked back down at her shaking hands.

Shauna examined her with a frown, appreciating Mari having her back, but wishing she sounded slightly less fanatical. It wasn’t as convincing when the person saying it sounded like they were about to crack.

“Right… thank you, Mari.” Shauna turned back to a thoughtful Van and said, “Can you and Tai—” she realized Taissa was pretending Shauna wasn’t there, staring at the wall, so she amended her question. “Can you help Akilah keep an eye on Jackie for me while I’m… busy, please?”

Van looked at her with a frown and then glanced at Misty.

Shauna looked around, knowing they had an audience, and for some reason she felt like Misty’s request was private, not for so many ears. “Misty wants to say goodbye to Coach, and then take some time by herself.”

Misty turned to with wide eyes, teary again. She looked down, staying silent.

Van nodded slowly, expression becoming compassionate as she said, “Okay, uh, yeah then, I’ll help Akilah keep an eye on her. Don’t worry. I’ll come get you if something happens.” she grimaced, looking sick.

“I need some help to carry the body out. Then knock on the front door if you need me. And, um, don’t go near the windows to the left when looking outside.” She’d considered doing it in the meat shed for more privacy, but that was Shauna and Jackie’s place. She didn’t want it sullied like that.

Mari, Melissa, and, Travis stood to help her.

Javi stood too, and Travis whipped around with a glare. “No.”

“But—”

“I appreciate it, Javi, but your brother’s right.” A small smile came to her face. “Four people is plenty, any more and we’ll just trip over each other.” They all knew that wasn’t the reason, but she hoped it would save Javi’s pride and his need to argue if she gave him an out.

Travis’ brow rose at her excuse, but he nodded when Javi’s shoulders slumped and he sat back down.

---

They moved the body, all acting like this was normal—like the meat shed was just their farm, and they were taking an animal out to prepare for dinner.

The old butcher’s station was still there, even under all the snow, and after clearing it, they moved the cadaver on top with a grunt. The other three left after that, avoiding looking too closely at the body—or each other.

“You’re sure you wanna be here for this, Misty?” Shauna asked, as she looked down at his clothes and thought about how she’d now have to cut them from his body. The act oddly seemed more intimate to Shauna than butchering him would be.

“Yes,” Misty said without hesitation.

Shauna studied her. Misty’s expression stayed serious and blank under her scrutiny. She nodded. “Okay.”

She started cutting away his clothes, and a niggling worry grew that Misty was gonna be weird and make Shauna have to tell her to leave, but, her eyes never strayed from Coach’s face.

Shauna grabbed a wide scrap of cloth and placed it over his groin when done. She looked up at a teary-eyed, stone faced Misty. “Do you wanna say anything?”

Misty stayed silent for a few moments, staring at his face, then she swallowed. “I hated you.”

Shauna’s brow furrowed, confused. Misty had been obsessed with Coach almost immediately.

“But”—Misty’s eyes moved from the body to stare at Shauna— “it was hard to hold on to that feeling when I saw what he caused with Jackie.”

Shauna’s eyes widened, her hand loosening around her knife in her surprise. She realized Misty was talking to *her*. “I, um, meant say something to him…”

Misty nodded. “I know. I just wanted you to know that.” It was hard for Shauna to understand the look she was getting from Misty right then. But, if she had to name it, she’d call it understanding.

There was something about getting that expression and that short speech. Something about hearing someone else say they understood why Shauna did what she did.

And there was something especially soothing about it coming from Misty, given the circumstances.

It felt like salvation.

“Thank you, Misty.” Shauna said, staring back.

Misty nodded, and took a deep breath, sitting nearby. She nodded again, telling Shauna to proceed.

Shauna made her first cut into Co—into Ben’s body, bleeding him out, and she let Misty’s words wash over her again.

She watched the blood drip down to the ground, and didn’t even feel guilty at the feeling the sight gave her. She thought perhaps he deserved this, that maybe this would be his way of atonement.

Ben caused what happened to Jackie, so now he could make up for it by helping her heal.

---

It was hours later that they went back inside together. Shauna walked forward, stepping past a shaking Mari, her earlier bravado forgotten at the sight that this was real and happening.

She could see the guilt and sickness in so many faces—eyes that wouldn’t look at her or the plate in her hand. Skin turning green or grey as their minds came to the same conclusion about what she held. Neither emotion, however, could overtake the looks of hunger that came to their expressions when Shauna thanked The Wilderness for their gift, and placed the rations in the pan over the fire.

---

Shauna walked into Jackie’s room and smiled at seeing her awake. “Hey.”

Jackie smiled back, and her eyes zeroed in on the bowl—the smell most likely getting her attention. Her grin widened. “You guys caught something?”

She stuttered in her step, her smile wobbled, but then she caught herself and returned to normal.

“Yep, we got lucky! Natalie found a deer just when we all thought we’d finally starve.” Shauna chuckled as she reached Jackie’s bedside, and she hoped it didn’t sound as uncomfortable to Jackie’s ears as it did her own.

“Shauna,” a voice growled out from behind her, and she jumped, spinning around to see Tai standing there with her eyes narrowed. “I knew you’d try to pull this shit.”

Shauna subtly shook her head, hoping Tai would just let this go. Jackie needed to eat, and Shauna wasn’t sure if she would if she knew where it came from. Can’t Tai just mind her own business and let her handle this?

Jackie leaned back, her eyes ping-ponging between them in confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Tell her what you almost made her eat without saying anything, Shauna,” Tai spat out as she stomped into the room.

“Goddamnit, Taissa,” Shauna said under her breath, frustration welling up inside her.

Tai went to stand near Jackie’s bed and glared at Shauna with her arms crossed. “Tell her, or I will.”

Jackie looked at the bowl still in her hand, paling. “What is it, Shauna?” she asked with a shaking voice.

Shauna sighed out through her nose, long and hard. “It’s not an animal.” She met Jackie’s eyes. “It’s Coach Ben.”

Jackie leaned away, shaking, turning green, head turning rapidly back and forth in the negative. She was going through everything the people outside this room did.

But there was a little extra, as she also looked at Shauna with betrayal. Again.

How did this keep happening?

“You were just going to let me eat it?” Jackie asked, voice raising, glare coming into place as tears filled her gaze.

Shauna considered her options. Studied the anger on Tai’s face, and the pain on Jackie’s.

“You got what you wanted, Tai. Now let me speak to Jackie in private,” Shauna said with a scowl. She was feeling betrayed here too—not that either of them would care.

Tai glanced at Jackie, making her hackles raise. Did she think she needed to protect her from Shauna or something?

Jackie hesitated, studying Shauna. Finally, she sighed, nodding at Taissa. “It’s fine.”

Tai glared at Shauna and walked towards the door.

“And um, thanks Tai. I—just, thank you.” Jackie said to her back.

Shauna crossed her arms, getting more irritated by the second.

Taissa nodded and closed the door after throwing Shauna one last glare.

Jackie turned her scowl onto her and Shauna groaned, sitting in the chair by her bed.

“Did you seriously try to make me a fucking cannibal without telling me?! What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Jackie said, voice raising, dark look still in place.

Shauna put the bowl down on the nightstand, ignoring Jackie looking at it with distaste.

“Well, I’ve never been officially diagnosed with anyth—”

“Shauna! Does this seem like the time for jokes?” Jackie asked, looking like she was two seconds from calling back Tai and telling her to escort Shauna away.

She sighed and rubbed at her forehead. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Jackie.”

The other girl looked at her with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. It was the first time Shauna would describe someone as flabbergasted, and she knew it wasn’t the time, but she couldn’t help but find the look cute.

“An apology. An explanation. A-a groveling! Something, Shauna!” Jackie snapped.

Shauna imagined herself groveling for Jackie on her knees, looking up at her for forgiveness. Her lips almost twisted into a scowl as she realized she’d pantomimed that plenty of times over the last few months in the shed.

“Dammit, Shauna! Are you even listening to me?!” Jackie said, getting agitated, breath increasing. Shauna’s eyes widened, worry overtaking her thoughts as she bolted forward and did exactly what she got annoyed thinking about.

Her knees hit the ground beside Jackie’s bed and she looked at a startled Jackie with wide eyes.

“You’re still really weak. Calm down, please,” Shauna said, tears gathering, grabbing Jackie’s hand to rub her thumb along the back of it.

Jackie’s mouth flapped open and closed, staring at her, eyes roaming her face. Then her head slammed back into the pillow behind her, and she groaned loud and long, all exasperation.

“You’re so unfair, Shipman,” she muttered, eyes glued to the ceiling.

Shauna’s brows furrowed, not understanding what she meant, but she just shook her head, knowing it was time to speak before Jackie somehow hurt herself with how upset she was getting.

“I-I, just…” Shauna paused, and Jackie turned back to her. ‘I didn’t know if you’d eat if I told you.’ She looked away from the other girl, her own breath picking up. “And you *have* to eat, Jackie. You were—you—you can’t not eat—not after—cause if you don’t—” The tears finally poured, and Shauna feared she was on the brink of another panic attack.

A hand came to her cheek and turned it back to a softer looking Jackie, frown in place, eyes roaming her face. Her thumb came up and wiped away the moisture on Shauna’s face.

A hiccup released from Shauna’s mouth, and she couldn’t hold it back anymore. She sobbed. It all came to her then. She’d killed a man. She’d almost lost Jackie. She’d just butchered her fucking soccer coach and fed him to her teammates.

And now, Jackie was going to be stubborn and not eat, and she would die, and this would all be for nothing. If Jackie died, then Shauna would've become this *thing* for nothing, and she didn't know if she could handle that.

There was a shushing noise, and then Jackie pulled her forward, hugging her tight. "Relax, Shauna. I-I'll eat it, okay. Please, just calm down." She squeezed tighter, and then muttered, "I've never seen you like this before."

"I thought you were going to die, and I was so scared, Jackie," she said with a cry, curling into her neck for once.

Jackie stroked her hand up and down her back, letting her weep onto her shoulder, and Shauna didn't even care about how pathetic she must look.

---

Shauna cleaned her face as best as she could and appreciated that Jackie didn't comment on how much of a mess she must be as she stared down at the bowl of food.

Jackie shakily raised her hand and grabbed a small piece, examining it like it was an object from Mars. She sighed and glanced at her.

Shauna stared back, still red faced, and no doubt disgusting looking, but not wanting Jackie to feel any shame as she did what was necessary to survive.

Jackie stared down at the piece for a few moments more, and then she shoved it into her mouth. Her eyes closed, face scrunched up, disgust warring with relief. She chewed slowly, looking like she was trying to force herself not to spit it out.

Finally, she swallowed.

Shauna sighed, shoulders dropping, eyes closing. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't lie to me again, Shauna, especially not over something like that," Jackie said, picking up another bite and eating it, much less hesitant than the first.

"Okay." Shauna shifted in her seat and stared as Jackie ate every bite, not caring if she made her uncomfortable if it meant she could see her able to eat again.

Jackie sighed and put the bowl back on the nightstand. Her left hand went to her stomach, looking down at it with a frown, and pressing.

Shauna wasn't sure if this was about the food anymore, or if it was about her suddenly much flatter stomach. Jackie swallowed and then turned over so her back faced Shauna.

She stared at her back, a crack forming in her chest at Jackie's silent dismissal. Shauna then swallowed, standing to leave as she wanted.

Jackie reached back and pulled the blanket up, and Shauna sighed, relieved she was wrong. That she would still accept her touch. That Shauna could still hold Jackie.

Shauna kicked off her shoes and crawled in next to her, arms coming up around Jackie's chest, kissing the back of her head, and making sure to breathe in her sweet scent.

Jackie's softer, scrawnier hand came up and grabbed Shauna's, interlocking their fingers.

“Okay?” Shauna whispered.

Jackie nodded, and they both fell asleep.

## 15. Flower

It'd been a week since Ben's death now, and Jackie still wasn't thrilled with Shauna. But she'd also silently requested Shauna hold her each night, and didn't complain about her hovering—if anything, it was as she expected and Jackie enjoyed all the attention Shauna was giving her.

"Are you going to try hunting for animals again soon at least?" Jackie asked, looking down at her fingers from her place on the bed.

Shauna shifted in the chair nearby and nodded while writing in her journal.

She pretended not to notice Jackie staring at her.

Jackie sighed, moving as much as she could with how weak she still was. "What are you writing?"

Shauna looked up from her journal with a raised brow. She examined Jackie's expression, wondering why she'd asked. She'd never been so upfront before.

"Do you want some help sitting up?" Shauna asked, ignoring her question.

Jackie rolled her eyes, grumbling, "No."

Shauna hummed and looked back down to continue writing.

"Are you seriously gonna just sit there writing? I'm bored, Shipman," Jackie pouted. "Least you could do is tell me what's so important."

Shauna stared at the weapon of mass destruction on her face, and then groaned. "Fine."

Jackie's eyes widened, and an excited grin fell onto her lips.

She glanced down at what she wrote, and then up again at a vibrating, grinning Jackie. She'd mostly just been sleeping and processing since what happened, so to see her look so happy made Shauna more willing to indulge her.

Shauna sighed, looking down so she wouldn't have to see Jackie's expression as she read aloud, "Natalie's been avoiding me. Tai still isn't happy, but it's simmered down to annoyance now, and at least she'll talk to me. Most of the others are having trouble looking me in the eye. It's only been a week, but Jackie has been looking much better. I—" she cut herself off with a blush, as she realized what she wrote next.

"I, what? Don't stop there," Jackie said, and Shauna could hear the curiosity in her voice.

"Um, I don't think—"

"Please, Shipman? I think it'll make me feel better," Jackie said, making Shauna look up at her, only to see her pouting again.

Shauna's hand gripped tighter at her journal, irritation and amusement warring inside. She mumbled, "I don't know how Jackie still manages to look so pretty and put together even

after what happened."

She snapped the journal closed and looked away with red cheeks and a clenched jaw.

Jackie turned Shauna's head back with her palm and looked at her with soft eyes and a slight smile. The expression held adoration, and Shauna's cheeks burned brighter. "You're much sweeter in your journal."

Shauna stayed silent, not having the heart to tell her it definitely wasn't all that way. Shauna's entries on Jackie seemed to swing between love and hate.

She had a problem with extremes. It was one or the other with her, no room in between.

A knock rang out on the door, and Misty walked in. She'd been acting like she really was Jackie's nurse.

Shauna glanced at Jackie, sharing a look of amusement.

"And how are you doing this morning, Jackie?" Misty asked with a grin, practically skipping inside with how much she was enjoying herself.

Jackie smiled at her, far more kind than Shauna would be if Misty played nurse with her, and said, "I'm feeling better. Thank you, Misty."

Shauna smirked and went back to her journal, leaving them alone.

She hoped this ease between Jackie and her stayed. She was tired of fighting with her.

---

A month after Ben's death found Shauna waking in the middle of the night to soft crying.

She blinked her eyes a few times, wondering if she was imagining it, but the small shakes along Jackie's back in front of her told her she wasn't.

Her hands clumsily raised to Jackie's face to wipe away the tears. "What's wrong?" Shauna asked, a tired slur in her voice.

Jackie's crying cut off with a small giggle as she caught her hand. "You're gonna poke my eye out, Shauna." she said with a sniffle.

"Are you in pain? Do you need me to do something?" Shauna asked, still half asleep.

Jackie sighed. "No, a bad dream."

"What about?" Shauna asked, squeezing her tighter.

Jackie stayed silent, and Shauna almost fell back asleep, assuming she didn't want to talk about it. "I dreamt the baby survived, but I killed it anyway."

"Oh…" Shauna wished she could comfort her better, but only half her brain was working right now. It was just a dream, anyway.

"It's stupid. Don't worry about it," Jackie muttered.

"Do you wish it did?" Shauna licked lips, afraid of the answer. "Survive I mean."

Jackie stayed silent again, and this time Shauna knew she was just thinking, so she rubbed her thumb along her hands, being patient.

“No. Do you think that makes me a bad person?” Jackie asked shakily.

“Jackie, we can barely survive as we are now. What were we gonna do with a baby?” Shauna said, too tired to soften her question.

“You’re right.” Jackie nodded. “Probably suffered less this way anyway,” she whispered, and Shauna wasn’t sure which of them she was trying to convince.

“Probably,” Shauna mumbled, falling back asleep despite her best efforts. “I’ll carry our baby next time, so you don’t have to be sick again so much…” she trailed off, giving into her tiredness.

She heard a sharp bark of laughter before fully succumbing to the pull of sleep.

---

Almost two months had passed since Ben died and Jackie had gone back to sewing for little bits at a time. Shauna noticed everyone was a little kinder to Jackie afterward, a little gentler. She wasn’t sure if it was fear of Shauna’s wrath, respect for her, or a reaction to witnessing Jackie’s injury, but either way, it made a weight lift off Shauna’s chest she didn’t even realize was there.

Now though, Jackie was dozing on Shauna’s shoulder as she wrote in her journal about things she considered impersonal and didn’t mind Jackie seeing.

She was just finishing logging how much longer she expected Ben’s rations to last, when Jackie mumbled from her shoulder. “You never apologized, y’know?”

Shauna turned to her with furrowed brows, not understanding what she meant. “I apologized for the Ben thing as soon as it happened.”

Jackie smiled against Shauna’s shoulder. “Yeah, I know. It’s hard to forget you crying on your knees for me.” Her voice ended up sounding flirtatious by the end. Shauna swallowed, wondering if she meant to do that and make her heart rate speed up.

“Then what’s your problem?” Shauna asked in a grumble.

Jackie sighed, right into Shauna’s ear, making her roll her eyes and flick her in the thigh in response. “I meant, y’know, literally everything else, Shauna.”

Shauna paused, looking up in thought. She never apologized, did she? Her plan to just move on and hope everyone forgot seemed to work better on herself than it did Jackie. After a moment of thought, she mentally shrugged and said, “Okay. I’m sorry.”

Jackie’s head moved away, and she glared at her. “That’s it? Seriously?”

Shauna’s brow furrowed, not understanding the big deal. If this was an apology right after it happened, she’d understand, but it’s been months. They’d been through so much, and she gave Jackie a great apology already—on something unrelated, but still.

“I’m really sorry,” Shauna said slowly, hoping that would be enough and they could get back to what they were doing.

Jackie huffed and moved to stand, and Shauna pulled her back down with a groan.

“Okay…” Shauna’s shoulders dropped, and she looked at Jackie as seriously as possible. “I’m really, *really* sorry.”

Jackie shoved her away, and Shauna popped back up with a grin. She could see the smile fighting to stay away, and she knew Jackie wasn’t as mad as she wanted Shauna to believe.

Shauna’s hand came up to Jackie’s thigh and her thumb rubbed back and forth on her jeans.

Jackie’s eyes darkened, and Shauna leaned in.

A banging on the shed door interrupted whatever was going to happen, and Shauna scowled.

“I know you crazy kids are having tons of fun in there, but the rest of us are hungry, Shauna!” Van called from the other side, laughter in her voice.

Shauna sighed and stood, helping a disappointed Jackie up to her feet. They hadn’t done anything except cuddle and hug since Jackie had been injured. She wondered if she felt the same amount of untapped desire as Shauna did.

Going by the frustration and want in her eyes, she’d assume yes, and that made a small smirk come to her lips.

Jackie rolled her eyes, but Shauna could see the slight flush to her face that wouldn’t go away. “I’ll see you later, Shauna.” She leaned forward and pecked her on the cheek. “How about a better apology next time I see you?”

Shauna tilted her head thoughtfully.

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She tapped her pencil on her sparse journal page that was labeled apology in big bold letters at the top. Shauna had been sitting on the steps up to the cabin waiting on Javi for so long that she’d gotten bored and started tracing the letters over and over again.

The page was blank, apart from the title.

“Apology?” Misty said, curiously looking over her shoulder.

Shauna jumped up, turning to her with a venomous glare. She had to restrain herself from throttling her. “*Do not* look over my shoulder when I’m writing like that.”

Misty stumbled back, wide eyed. “I-I’m sorry. It was just hard to miss what you wrote. An-and you’re the one sitting in such a well-used throughway!” she said with a shaky swallow.

Shauna rolled her eyes, willing to let go of her anger if it meant Misty would go away. “Whatever, just don’t do it again.”

She sat back down with a huff and kept her journal firmly closed.

“Okay…” Misty shuffled around, and Shauna grew impatient. “Um…”

“What Misty? Just spit it out,” she said with a tired sigh.

“Is the apology for Jackie?” Misty asked, eyes wide with that damnable curiosity that everyone found annoying.

“Why would you think it’s for Jackie?” Shauna snapped.

“Well, there’s no one else you’d care this much about apologizing to,” Misty said, tone thoughtful as she nodded to herself.

Her teeth clenched, hating that she was right. “Fine. Yes. It’s for Jackie. Can you go away now?”

“Y’know,” Misty said, causing Shauna to groan. ‘I’ve always had this fantasy where my love needed to prove themselves to me.’ Her voice increased in speed and excitement. “So they travelled far and wide looking for a token for my affection!”

Shauna looked at her, frowning, having no clue what her point was. “Okay, good for you, I guess.”

Misty groaned, looking at Shauna like she was being impossible. “You should do that for Jackie!”

“A token for Jackie?” Shauna scanned the forest as if that’d help her make sense of Misty’s rambling. “Okay, I’ll get her a tree branch,” she said, sounding derisive.

“Oh! Or a winter flower.” Misty said with a grin, not detecting Shauna’s sarcasm. “Y’know, there’s a few species that grow in the area during this time. I’m sure—”

Javi walked out of the cabin, ready for their fruitless daily hunting endeavor, cutting Misty off.

Shauna jumped up, and she could’ve hugged him with how he just saved her from whatever this was. “Okay, Misty! I’ll look for a flower.” She grabbed a surprised Javi’s sleeve and dragged him away. “Bye! We gotta go!”

---

She considered their hunting basically a waste of time at this point. She sees now why Natalie—who eats her food every night but still wouldn’t talk to Shauna about anything substantial—became so pessimistic.

Shauna had her own doubts that there was even anything out there anymore, but she was pretty sure that just giving up and telling everyone to hunt each other for sport without at least trying wouldn’t be very favorable.

She figured it’d best be brought up while starving, so the desperation caused less infighting.

It wasn’t something she thought would be fun, or looked forward to doing, but she’s started giving up hope about animals coming back. So, if it was between this or death, then

what choice did she have?

And, if Shauna was being honest, she figured she already did it once, so what was one more? Or two? Or three, even? Would fewer people suddenly make her less of a cannibal?

She and Javi walked quietly, an easy camaraderie between them.

He was looking at the list today, choosing where to go, something Shauna did when she didn't want to deal with it—and to give him some of that responsibility he'd been craving.

"I don't think we've tried this one in a few days." He pointed at something on the list three miles away.

Shauna gave him an easy nod, examining the desolate snowy forest around her, and then scowled at herself when she realized she'd been unconsciously looking for flowers.

"Hey, so I heard from Gen, who heard from Melissa, who heard from Mari, who heard from Akilah," Javi said, making Shauna blink wildly as she tried to keep up with what he was saying. "That during Jackie's um… thing, that you saved her by having her bite you. Is that true?" he asked with wide eyes.

"I—uh what?" Shauna said, still confused.

"Did Jackie biting you save her life?"

"Oh, uh. Yes," Shauna nodded, eyeing him and wondering where this was going.

"So, if other people are hurt, does that mean they can just bite you to be safe?" He looked fascinated with the concept, and Shauna shuddered, imagining anyone other than Jackie having their teeth anywhere near her vulnerable neck.

"Um, no. It's, uh, different," she said, cringing at herself and her poor answer.

Javi cocked his head to the side, and Shauna had never hated how much this shit interested him until now. "How?"

"Because, um… there's additional, uh, aspects that apply to Jackie, and not to others," Shauna said, and if Javi bought this, it'd be a miracle at this point.

"Oh, you mean how you guys are always having sex in the meat shed?" Javi asked, frowning thoughtfully.

Shauna choked on her own tongue. "Who told you that?!"

"Why would I need to be told?" Javi asked, furrowing his brow—looking at Shauna like she was the one saying something crazy.

Shauna groaned into her hands and then decided to it was time to end this conversation. "Yep, that's why. And so y'know. Um." She nodded frantically. "Jackie only. Sorry everyone else."

"Well, what abo—"

A bush ruffled nearby, and Shauna blessed her luck, both for ending this conversation and perhaps giving her an animal.

She walked up to it slow and steady, nodding to Javi, who was ready to throw at whatever came running out. Shauna reached forward, slowly pulling the leaves back—only to see nothing inside.

They both frowned, and she moved her hand in deeper, hoping they weren't going insane.

Her palm caught on something sharp, and she hissed at the feeling of her skin being caught and tearing. Shauna drew her hand back, looking at the cut going straight up her index finger.

She cursed and shook her hand out, scowling as she watched the blood drip down.

"Hey, what's that?" Javi asked, stepping closer and kneeling down.

Shauna followed what he was looking at and saw her blood had splattered onto something below. She hadn't even noticed it because it'd blended into the snow so well.

She kneeled down with him. "Flowers," Shauna muttered.

They were white, with too many petals to count. The petals stacked on top of each other, forming a jagged circle, and making it so each layer grew larger and further from the middle. All together, it was beautiful.

Unfortunately, almost all of them had been crushed by her boots. The only one that survived was the one she got blood splatter on.

Shauna frowned, reaching forward and plucking it. She felt like the universe was laughing at her. Misty suggested a flower, she found some on accident, but the only one left had her blood on it?

Javi reached forward to touch a petal carefully. "I didn't even know flowers could grow in the snow like that."

Shauna shrugged and stood, not able to look away from the flower.

"Are you keeping it?" Javi asked curiously.

Shauna clutched it tighter, like she thought he'd try to tear it from her hand. She realized how silly the thought was as soon as she had it. "Yeah, I guess I am."

She shook her head at herself and continued to their destination. Weapon in one hand, and flower in the other.

---

Somehow, Shauna managed not to damage the flower at all throughout their hours out there. It probably helped that nothing happened, but she'd also been so careful with the thing, she'd found herself embarrassed when she noticed how gentle she was being.

Javi at least didn't say anything to her about it. So there were some small blessings.

She nodded to him and made her way to the meat shed—flower still clutched in her hand like an idiot. She felt like a five-year-old getting ready to give their crush a gift.

Shauna cursed Misty for even putting the idea in her head and contemplated throwing it out as she made her way into the shed.

Her feet stopped, surprised to see Jackie already inside, reading one of the few books lying around the cabin.

Jackie looked up, grin in place, and then her eyes lowered. “What’s that?”

For a long moment, Shauna considered taking the flower and shoving it in her mouth so Jackie couldn’t see it. She then realized how childish and ridiculous she was being.

Shauna could just throw it outside. She didn’t have to resort to eating the whole thing.

Jackie had stood and made her way closer while Shauna was in her own world, and her eyes widened. “Is that a flower?”

Shauna froze, her shoulders going to her ears, her face turning as red as the blood on its petals.

Jackie watched her reaction curiously.

She shoved the flower forward, stiff and robotic. “Here,” Shauna mumbled.

Her brow rose, looking between Shauna’s awkward face and the object in her hands. “What?” Jackie looked perplexed, like the idea of Shauna holding a flower and handing it to her was so weird she couldn’t even comprehend it.

Shauna avoided her eyes and shoved her hand closer to Jackie. “I got you a flower while I was hunting. Take it.”

Jackie cautiously grabbed it, like a bomb might go off if she wasn’t too careful. “You got me a flower?” Jackie murmured, trailing off.

With her hands now unoccupied, Shauna crossed her arms, scowling at the wall behind Jackie’s head. “Yes, I got you a flower. Just throw it away if you don’t want it…”

If she threw away the flower Shauna found protected and carried all the way here, she was liable to snap.

“Why?” Jackie asked slowly, examining the flower in her hand, being more delicate with it than even Shauna had been.

“Cause I thought you’d like it. I don’t know,” Shauna said. She couldn’t tell if Jackie was making fun of her or genuinely asking. She sighed to herself, feeling stupid and hating it. ‘And to say sorry, I guess,’ she mumbled. “About the… well uh, everything.”

She played with the dirt under her shoe, not able to look up at her anymore.

“You got me a flower because you thought I’d like it, and to say sorry?” Jackie asked, sounding like she was in disbelief.

Shauna scowled, wondering why Jackie had to be so difficult.

“If you don’t want it, give it back,” Shauna snapped, holding her hand out.

The thought that Jackie didn’t like it made her chest well up with hurt, but if it meant getting out of this situation with any amount of her dignity intact, then she’d take the stupid thing and go.

Jackie cradled the flower, close and protective, glaring at her. “No! You gave it to me. It’s mine.”

Shauna’s bad mood lifted. “Oh. So, you like it?” She was having trouble keeping her small grin from growing to spit her face completely in half with how wide it’d be.

Jackie rolled her eyes and stepped forward to put some of Shauna’s hair behind her ear. “I love it. Thank you, Shipman.” She leaned forward and softly brought her lips to Shauna’s.

Her body became suffused with warmth at the first touch of soft lips in weeks. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she breathed out a small, content breath through her nose.

Way too soon, Jackie stepped back. Shauna felt like the kiss had been barely more than a peck.

“Stop pouting, Shauna.” Jackie smiled, her index finger reaching up to poke her lips.

Shauna peaked her tongue out, so just the tip of it touched the top of Jackie’s finger.

She smirked at Shauna. “Sorry, Shipman. I have to go back inside. I was just in here to get a few minutes of quiet while I took a break.” Her hand reached up and wiped the small amount of moisture on her finger along Shauna’s cheek with a silly little grin. The smile distracted Shauna so much that she couldn’t even find it within herself to be annoyed by the spit now on her face.

Jackie grabbed her book and ignored Shauna’s returning pout. “You’re cute when you’re nervous, y’know?” Jackie said as she turned around, smirk back in place.

Shauna rolled her eyes and ignored the heat blasting onto her face, but it was hard to stay irritated as she watched Jackie look down at the flower with a soft smile on her face.

It was very, very rare, but maybe Misty had good ideas sometimes.

## 16. Melt

With the melting snow came a sigh of relief and nervous glances.

Sure, spring was coming soon, but Coach Ben's body was almost gone, and nightly rations had lessened again. Shauna gave it two weeks—until the end of the month, if their tallying was correct—to try for an animal before calling it.

She still needed to figure how it would work. It needed to be ritualistic, suitably dramatic, and done in a way Shauna could manipulate the results with no one realizing it.

It'd be downright embarrassing if she got her or Jackie killed because of bad luck.

She'd also needed to come up with a way to get Natalie to come around, because she was a little afraid doing this before then might set her over the edge and cause Shauna problems in the long run.

They'd just got done with their first daily prayer outside in weeks, and she could see the return to some normalcy and spirituality helped raised many people's moods.

Shauna grinned when she noticed Jackie waiting nearby, and felt an embarrassing fluttering in her stomach when Jackie grinned back.

"Do you get anything out of that, or do you just enjoy wasting your time?" Jackie asked quietly when Shauna sat next to her on the cabin steps.

"I get to enjoy a nice morning outside." Shauna shrugged. It was a good time to think, so it wasn't too bad.

Jackie rolled her eyes. "Uh huh."

"What are you doing out here, anyway?" Shauna asked. Jackie would typically be inside gossiping with Lottie and Akilah over their work by now.

"Oh! Right, I wanted to ask you something," Jackie said with an excited smile.

"Okay…" Shauna said, not able to smother her own smile at Jackie's face.

"I was thinking, now that it's heating up, you could um, maybe let me go hunting with you…" Jackie's voice quieted, losing her bravado the more she spoke.

Shauna examined her expression, wondering why she looked so nervous. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

Jackie's head popped up, that old familiar confident grin returning. "Really? You don't mind?"

"Why would I?" Shauna stood and shrugged. It wasn't nearly as cold anymore, and she wasn't going to complain about Jackie wanting to learn to do more. Her only stipulation would've been that Jackie had to go with her, and that's what the other girl wanted, anyway.

And if she wanted to spend some time with Jackie somewhere no one could come knock on the door whining about being hungry—that wouldn't hurt either. They'd been in a much better place since Shauna gave her that flower a week before—she really hated that Misty was right.

So, some time away from the others wouldn't be a bad thing, and she'd still show Jackie how to throw the spear, though Shauna had doubts she was going to be any good at it with those bony arms of hers…

---

Shauna's mouth gaped open, looking between the spear that fell from its perfect bullseye on the makeshift dart board she'd scratched out on the tree, and an excitedly bouncing Jackie.

Her throws didn't have the most power, as the spear never could get very far into the trunk, but they were scarily accurate. It showed Shauna that Jackie was as good at aiming with her hands as she was with her feet.

"You're really good at that," Shauna muttered with a scowl. Jackie sucking at most things out there had done a lot for her own confidence. To see her so naturally good at something that was part of Shauna's duties brought out some of her lingering bitterness.

Jackie spun toward her with a wide grin and leaped at her without responding. Her legs hooked around Shauna's waist, her arms around her neck, and her lips attached to hers before she even knew what was happening.

Shauna gasped in surprise against Jackie, but quickly tightened her grip, making sure she wouldn't fall. She'd always been scrawny in a way that Shauna found cute, and right now it meant she had no trouble keeping her steady and enjoying the slight curves pressed into her.

As the scent of sweat and sugar filled the air, and Jackie's taste lingered on her tongue, her negative feelings melted away.

Who knew Jackie climbing Shauna like she was a monkey was the key to working through her jealousy?

Shauna pulled back, and Jackie started sucking on the overlapping scars on her neck. Her grip tightened around Jackie's thighs, having to work to remember why she'd do something as blasphemous as disconnect their lips.

Jackie moved away from her neck, and Shauna finally recalled what she had been trying to say. "I thought you wanted to learn how to hunt," she said, gasping.

Lips moved to Shauna's ear, hot breath against her skin. "Are you seriously going to complain right now?" Jackie whispered.

She brought up an excellent point. Shauna should shut the hell up. She lowered to her knees as carefully as she could, and then grunted when it still wasn't enough as she landed on them harder than she meant to.

Jackie pulled back with a playful pout. "Want me to kiss it better?"

Shauna's eyes widened. She'd never seen this mischievous, flirtatious side of Jackie during sex before. The only time Jackie didn't act like she hated Shauna during their former trysts was when they were both so high they could barely remember anything beside each other.

Jackie pushed until Shauna's back landed on the grass, looking up in shock. She leaned down and captured Shauna's lips again, practically devouring her with every movement of her mouth.

Shauna whimpered, feeling like she was being ravaged and hoping it would never end.

Jackie sat up and stared at her. Shauna rose to follow, but Jackie pushed her back to the ground again with a hand on her chest.

"Wh—Jackie? What?" Shauna said with a pant, getting annoyed that Jackie wouldn't let her do what she wanted with her.

Jackie smirked and unzipped Shauna's jacket to let it flap open. The sight of her smirk made Shauna's brain such a jumbled mess, she forgot what she was even complaining about.

She grabbed Shauna's shirt next and pulled that up to just over the top of her bra with a look so hungry that it made Shauna feel as if Jackie would take bites out of her soon and enjoy every swallow.

Then Jackie buried her face in Shauna's cleavage like she was planning on living there from now on and paying rent.

"Uh!" Shauna stuttered out some type of vowel, trying to say a word she forgot the name of at the sight of Jackie Taylor enthusiastically putting her face into her breasts.

She felt Jackie's mouth working on her skin. Saliva, warmth, softness, sucking, nipping. It was all liable to make Shauna lose her mind, and Jackie had barely even done anything to her yet.

Jackie spent her time there, enjoying herself and making Shauna feel like her heart was beating so fast it was going to pop right out of her chest and into Jackie's open mouth.

Finally after so many minutes Shauna forgot what it was like to have breasts that weren't worshipped by a pretty, eager girl with soft lips and an even softer tongue—Jackie left a tender kiss on top of both cups of her bra like she was saying goodbye, and Shauna gaped down at her, trying to catch her breath.

Her head moved down, leaving a moist trail from her mouth that left Shauna feeling like she was going to explode if Jackie didn't do something soon. Jackie's lips lingered on Shauna's lower stomach, and she only realized why when she felt her pants loosen around her waist and get pulled down.

Jackie's fingers hooked in her underwear, glancing up Shauna's body with wet, kiss-swollen lips, messy hair, and flushed cheeks. Their eyes met, and Jackie murmured, "Is this okay?"

Shauna had never been more attracted to another person in her life, and she thought she would build a statue in Jackie's honor if only she could make sure it captured her likeness in this moment.

Shauna's head bobbed up and down frantically, eyes wide.

Jackie's hand pulled down her underwear, and still keeping their eyes locked, her mouth went to Shauna's thigh and sucked a bruise into the skin.

She whined at the teasing and tried to grab Jackie's hair to pull her closer, but she just batted her hand away with a raised brow.

Her lips came away from her thigh. "Say please."

"What?" Shauna asked in a high pitch.

Her mouth went to her other leg, pretending she couldn't hear her.

"Jackie," she wailed, and knew she would feel embarrassed later as tears gathered in her eyes.

"Say please, and I'll do what you want, Shauna," Jackie said against her skin.

Shauna was trying to be stubborn, but one more bruise sucked into her thigh while Jackie ignored the apex of her legs, had her mumbling the word, "Please" repeatedly.

She wasn't even bothered about the smug smile that came to Jackie's lips when, in the next second, her tongue did a long swipe up her slit, causing Shauna's head to get thrown back with a deep and long moan.

Then Jackie's tongue went to her clit and left slow, gentle licks that were making Shauna crazy.

"Faster," she groaned, tears finally falling.

Jackie stopped, and Shauna almost sobbed as she wondered why she had to be such a bitch.

"Faster, what?" Jackie asked, staring up at her.

"Jackie!" Shauna cried out, frustrated.

"Say it one more time, and I promise you don't have to again," Jackie said, tone softening, hands massaging her thighs to soothe her.

"Faster, *please*," Shauna said, panting.

Jackie looked up at her and said, "Good job, baby."

Shauna felt like her body melted into liquid, never realizing how much a small acknowledgement from Jackie did for her.

Her mouth returned to her clit, and this time Jackie's tongue moved quickly like Shauna begged for. Jackie's hand moved down, and Shauna's not sure if she was even looking at her, but she hoped her frantic nod was noticeable enough so Jackie knew she approved.

She felt two fingers fill her, and the high-pitched cry she released would be embarrassing if she was with anyone else.

The fingers hooked forward, and Jackie was apparently much more attentive than Shauna had ever given her credit for, as it didn't take her long to find the soft and spongy part inside

that made her feel like she was about to go to another plane of existence.

Shauna knew any minute now she'd finally find the relief she's been building toward, but she wanted Jackie up here where she could see her, and she needed one last thing she'd been yearning for in a way most people would probably consider pathetic.

She pulled at Jackie's hair, and her head popped up, mouth and chin glistening, air puffing in and out like she was the one being eaten within an inch of her life.

Shauna groaned and could barely get out. "Come here… *Please*, come here."

Jackie's eyes widened, her hand starting to remove itself from her legs too, before Shauna grabbed her wrist, signaling her not to. She left it where it was and scrambled up so their faces could meet again.

Shauna connected their lips, desperately licking the taste of herself from her tongue, and basking in Jackie's sweet scent melding with her own. Her arms wound around Jackie, digging her fingers into her back, pressing her close like Shauna was afraid she would change her mind and pull away—not that she had to worry, as Jackie pushed in just as urgently.

Jackie's hand started moving again, and Shauna slumped back, head thumping onto the grass as she looked up at Jackie with glassy eyes.

"Tell me you love me," Shauna whimpered, just shy of begging.

Jackie's gaze softened, eyes searching Shauna's face.

The second of prolonged silence had Shauna cringing, worried Jackie was trying to figure out how to let her down easy.

Instead, Jackie lowered her sweaty forehead to Shauna's and whispered, "I love you, Shauna—more than anything."

Shauna's breath hitched, pathetic tears flowing again, but Jackie kissed them away—gentle, patient, and *loving.*

She finally found that feeling she'd been chasing for years now. The feeling that Jackie Taylor loved her most, and in the way Shauna had always wanted.

It made the tingle down her spine that she got at the sight of dripping blood and gore pale in comparison. That was a small ripple inside her compared to this tsunami.

Shauna's breathing increased, going faster than it ever had before, as she found her release. Her arms clung tighter to Jackie, nails digging in to her back as her hand slowed inside. She whispered about how much she loved Shauna, how good she was doing, how pretty she looked, and every word somehow increased her pleasure.

It took a few minutes for her to calm down and come back to awareness to Jackie softly pecking her face.

Shauna's breath was slower, and her limbs were looser. She felt calmer than she'd been in months, and happier than she'd been her entire life.

"You didn't want to hunt at all, did you?" Shauna mumbled as Jackie was kissing her cheek.

Jackie brushed her fingers through Shauna's hair. "Of course not. I can't believe you thought I'd want to go hunting."

Shauna sighed and pulled her back in for a quick kiss. Her hand came up, thumb rubbing back and forth on Jackie's jaw. "I don't know, Jax, with that aim you got, I might have to move you from sewing."

Jackie scowled and pinched her in the side, making her flinch away with a smirk. "Don't even fucking joke about that, Shipman."

Shauna pulled her down for another kiss to shut her up.

## 17. Beaver

Travis told Shauna approximately where he and Natalie would be that day, and promised he'd have the rifle. Just in case.

It was odd walking around the woods without Javi, but she knew this would be better off done alone.

"So… are you ever planning on talking to Shauna again?" Travis asked from nearby.

Shauna appreciated the lead in and the way to locate them.

"I talked to her today," Natalie said, a small amount of bite in her tone.

Travis sighed. "You know what I mean, Nat. You talked to her like a coworker. You guys used to be friends."

"Yeah, well, that was before she beat Ben to death and then ate him, Travis!" she snapped.

"You say that like you didn't eat him too, Natalie," Shauna said, finally able to find them.

Natalie spun around and looked at them both with a dark glare. "Did you set this up?" she snapped at Travis.

"I asked him to. Fight with me, not him," Shauna said, sighing.

"Oh, I will. Don't worry about that," she snapped at Shauna.

Shauna ignored her and nodded to Travis, making him walk away with the rifle under Natalie's furious scowl.

"This is low, even for you, Shauna!" Natalie stomped up to her.

Shauna furrowed her brows, confused. She'd definitely been lower. "It is?"

Natalie made a low, annoyed tone in the back of her throat. "Right, I forgot I was talking to a murderous cannibal."

"You're also a cannibal…" Shauna said, brow raised. She'd just come out there to work this out. Now, she's not sure what this has turned into.

"Not by choice!" Natalie yelled, a crack in her voice and tears gathering in her eyes.

Shauna leaned backward slightly at the intensity of her yell. "Do you think I wanted to do this?" she asked with a deep frown.

"No! Of course I don't fucking think that!" Natalie said, grabbing her head and groaning, frustrated.

"Then what are you even talking about?" Shauna snapped.

"You could've chosen not to kill Ben! At least not like that!" Natalie shouted, tears falling. "I know you didn't have a choice for how we survived with no other food, but you didn't

have to—to brutalize him!"

"Jackie—"

"Stop using Jackie as an excuse for everything!" Natalie said, a dark, unimpressed look in her eye. And the way her expression seemed to look down on Shauna was what made her lose her temper.

"Ben almost fucking killed Jackie! He caused her to go into premature labor!" She shot forward, right into a still angry Natalie's face. "It's Ben's fault Jackie lost half the blood in her body. And if I had the chance to do it again, I'd make his death even fucking worse!"

A flare of Natalie's nostrils, and fast panting breaths was her response.

Then, Natalie's arm came up, and before Shauna could react, a fist hit her square in the mouth.

The punch knocked her head to the side, and the sudden whiplash hurt more than the actual blow did. She stumbled back, grunting—more surprised than in pain.

She raised her hand to her lip under Natalie's wide-eyed stare, seeming as shocked that she hit her as Shauna was. Her hand came back with a small amount of blood, the punch having split her lip. She stared at the red, and clenched her fist, taking a deep breath to calm herself down before they got into a fucking brawl out there.

Natalie's shoulders dropped, and she looked down at the drop of blood on her fist. "Did he really almost kill her with that shove, or are you lying again?"

"You think I'd lie about Jackie almost dying?" Shauna snapped, restraining herself *again* from punching Natalie in return for such a question.

Natalie rolled her eyes and said, "Yes."

Shauna huffed, shaking her head. "Whatever." The more she thought about it, the less sure she was that Natalie was wrong.

Natalie's hand came up, roughly wiping at her eyes. Something about the image made her feel a small clenching in her gut, so Shauna avoided looking at her, and ignored the sniffling she heard.

Shauna decided it was probably just irritation, as there was no reason to feel guilty about Natalie crying over something she caused when Ben brought it upon himself. She put it out of her mind.

Natalie turned, putting her back to Shauna. "C'mon, let's go back. We don't even have any weapons. This plan was stupid as shit. No wonder you were so desperate to get me to talk to you again if this was the best you could come up with."

"So, we're okay?" Shauna asked, hopeful they could move on and never talk about this again.

Natalie's shoulders dropped, looking exhausted. "What other choice do I have?"

Shauna looked down at her shoes, feeling like she was forcing Natalie to be her friend with a gun to her head.

“If you were worried the others would do something to you, or whatever.” Shauna jerkily shrugged. “I’d make sure everyone left you alone.” She was annoyed with Natalie blaming her for everything, but Shauna still felt a small swirl of *something* that made her want to stop having to hear Natalie cry again if she could help it.

Natalie huffed, letting out a choked laugh. “First Jackie, then Lottie, and now me. Don’t you think even they’re smart enough to see you just decree whatever the hell benefits you most at the time?”

“It’s not like it’s any different from other religions.” Shauna rolled her eyes. Laura Lee’s attitude toward it and easy adaption to it told her that much at least.

Natalie’s laugh at that seemed less teary that time. She gestured with her head toward the cabin.

Shauna nodded, a small smile growing from seeing Natalie laughing again.

“I’m double checking your story, though, and if I find out you’re lying, I’ll tell everyone you’re full of shit.” Natalie paused and looked at her seriously. “And I’ll make them believe my every word, Shauna. I swear. I’ll do it.”

Shauna nodded, relieved that everyone in the room would back her story. She didn’t know what’d she do if it came down to protecting everything she’s built out here.

Her eyes avoided looking at the glistening on Natalie’s cheeks left over from her tears as she made her way to her side.

---

Shauna never thought she’d be happy to feel grass crumble beneath her boots, crackling with every step she took, but it was a heavenly sensation and sound after experiencing such a deadly winter.

There were a few times over the past season where she had an irrational fear that she’d never be warm again, so to feel the sun heating her skin felt almost as miraculous as making up with Natalie.

The walk back to the cabin was silent, but comfortable. There was much less of the tension that’d been between them for weeks. Shauna could almost believe it was a new beginning caused by the spring.

“Your lip’s dripping,” Natalie said with a clenched jaw, avoiding Shauna’s eyes.

She raised her hand to her mouth, bringing it up to her and seeing her finger came away even darker than before.

“You think your followers are gonna try to kill me for hitting their precious savior?” Natalie said, disgust in her tone. Shauna tried to tamper her sigh, knowing how much it annoyed Natalie how quickly her cult could get defensive.

“No, they’ll be fine once I call them off.” She shook her head, secretly pleased that her followers were so loyal to her.

Natalie rolled her eyes and opened her mouth, but snapped it back shut when a high pitched squealing noise came from up ahead.

They shared an uncomfortable glance. The noise grated on Shauna's ears. It was distressing, every whine seeming to end in a louder cry. She wanted it to stop impinging on her eardrums as soon as possible.

She walked forward, her boots stepping onto hard gravel as she exited the tree line. Shauna realized they were at the lake. She scanned her surroundings, trying to figure out what made that ungodly noise, when she noticed a swipe of red on the gray lake shore that lead to the other side of a bolder.

Her curiosity increased, the sight of blood doing nothing but making her want to get closer.

Shauna tipped her chin toward it, and Natalie nodded, following behind her stiffly as she slowly made her way forward, rocks shifting between her every step and quietly scraping together.

She made it to where she saw the red striking away to find the noise was coming from an injured animal in the throes of death. Shauna stepped closer, and the noises turned into pain growls, as she got a good look at it. It was a beaver.

Shauna kneeled down, close enough to examine it, but not so close it could swipe her. She'd never seen one in real life before, so she was a little shocked to realize these things were actually pretty damn big. It had to be at least 3 feet long and that guess was on the lower end of what she was estimating.

Natalie made a disgusted sound in her throat, glancing away with a grimace. "Fuck! What did that? How'd it even get away? It looks half dead."

Shauna's eyes caught on the large and deep claw marks running down its side, and the bite taken out of its bleeding tail. Whatever got it, got it good. That was for sure.

Her lips twisted in thought as she watched its quick panicked breathing. The movement made the skin of her lip pull open again, causing her to hiss in pain. A drop of blood fell on the end of the beaver's tail, and Shauna's heart sped up as she saw the bit of red blend in seamlessly with the beavers.

She remembered suddenly the words spoken during Jackie's labor *'Your blood. Your blood…'* she stared at the terrified animal and recalled other times her blood preceded something that saved them all.

That first hunt with Javi where they caught those rabbits. Jackie had bitten her finger just days before she went out.

Then when she cut her hand after Natalie startled her. They found the porcupine.

And of course the labor, where she forced Jackie to bite her as hard as she could. Misty told her the bleeding had stopped soon afterward.

Was that really the answer? Something so simple? Shauna's blood?

Or is this just a sign she'd finally lost her mind?

Another drop from her lip landed on the beaver.

She swallowed and stood. She looked at Natalie, who was staring at her with a furrowed brow and tense jaw.

“We need to take this with us.” Shauna looked around, trying to find a rock or a sharp stick or something. But there was nothing but fucking pebbles.

Natalie grabbed her arm, worried look intensifying. “We don’t have any weapons here, and this thing is huge. We’re right by the cabin we can—”

“No!” Shauna pulled her arm out of her grip. Eyes wide, and breath coming in fast—terrified of leaving this gift behind and coming back to see that a predator other than Shauna had carried it off. “This is the first animal we’ve seen in months. I am not letting this disappear because we couldn’t handle this now.”

“Al-alright.” Natalie put her hands up soothingly. Whatever look Shauna was giving her making her nervous in return. “I’ll stay here, and you go—”

“So whatever hurt it can come back and attack you, too? Or so all this fucking blood can attract something even worse?” Shauna rapidly shook her head. “No, we finish this now.”

“With what weapon, Shauna?” Natalie said, throwing her arms up.

Shauna ignored her and turned to the half dead beaver. Shauna stepped toward it, and saw its tail twitch, wanting to attack her but too weak. Its growling increased, cutting off intermittently with pained cries and harsh breaths.

She stared down at it and how much agony the thing was in. If anything, this would be a mercy. She just wished she could make the death less painful than what she expected it was about to be—but she was too afraid to step away from it, even for just a moment. What if when she did it got stolen away from her?

Shauna stepped forward again.

She stomped on its head. The beaver let out a pained cry, and she was lucky her boots were so sturdy. The stomp would’ve hurt a lot worse than the quick shooting pain that traveled up her leg if they weren’t.

“Jesus christ, Shauna!” Natalie shouted, sounding appalled.

Shauna gritted her teeth. She told herself, like it was her new mantra: They needed food. Here was food. They needed a weapon. Here was a weapon.

She stomped again, even harder. And she finally felt a crack form under her foot. The animal was wailing now, crying out. Shauna wondered if it was for mercy, for death, or for a savior.

Natalie gagged from behind her and muttered, “I can’t listen to this anymore.”

Shauna couldn’t help but glance at her, only to see Natalie’s back and her trembling hands held tight over her ears.

She turned back, wanting the noises to end as badly as Natalie did. Contrary to what she might believe about Shauna after this, she didn’t enjoy torturing animals. She didn’t like these

terrible sounds either.

This kill wasn't about pleasure. It was about survival. If Natalie would stop being so uncharacteristically squeamish, she'd realize that too.

Her boot came up. She stomped harder than the last two times, using whatever little strength she had left in her emaciated body.

With a loud *CRACK* and *CRUNCH*, her sole finally broke through, blood spurting onto the pebbles of the shore. The tough leather protected her foot from the blood and scratching of bones as her shoe went into the side of its skull where it laid prone.

Its cries cut off, the only sound left being her heavier breathing from the exertion and the wind blowing through some trees nearby.

Shauna enjoyed the sudden silence, hoping the noises she caused wouldn't be burned into her memory as she feared. She let her heart calm, and waited until she didn't feel like she wanted to jump out of her own skin.

Her eyes skittered over the corpse one more time. She couldn't help but remember how Coach Ben's head was unrecognizable in the same way.

Shauna clenched her jaw, wondering if this was the only way she knew how to kill things. Savage and merciless.

She let out a breath through her nose, and finally, she looked behind her. "Natalie!" Shauna called. The other girl turned, staring down at the beaver with a disgusted grimace. "It's dead. Help me carry it."

The other girl shakily stepped forward, not able to look away from the animal. Natalie kneeled down. Her hands trembled.

Shauna glanced at the animal again. She swallowed as she looked at it from Natalie's perspective.

It looked brutalized. Head caved in. Claw marks up its side. Unrecognizable as a beaver if it didn't have its tail.

For Natalie, a hunter used to killing from afar with a rifle, the sight and sounds wouldn't be something typical for her, and she'd always been gentle at heart—even if she liked to pretend otherwise.

Natalie was still shaking, her panting getting faster. Shauna snapped, unable to sit and watch her spiral anymore that day. She reached forward and gripped her cheeks, forcing Natalie to look at her. She made her breathing even and obvious. "Relax. It's over, and now we have food. It's okay, Natalie. Just breathe."

Natalie's trembling slowed and her breathing matched up with Shauna's. Her body loosened, so it stopped looking like Natalie was about to run away from the sight of what Shauna did. The fear and disgust in her eyes abated, being replaced with something she could only describe as unfathomable sadness as she stared at Shauna for a few seconds more.

It made her arms twitch. Something about the look had Shauna wanting to hide away from Natalie in return.

Natalie gently pushed her hands off. “I’m okay.” She swallowed and nodded along with her words, as if to make them more convincing. “You’re right. We need this. It was just…” she trailed off.

Shauna nodded back, understanding in her gaze, not needing Natalie to finish her thought. “I know.”

“Yeah,” Natalie muttered.

“Are you okay to help me carry this, or do you need a minute?” Shauna asked, pushing her impatience down to be a decent person for once.

Natalie took a deep breath. “I’m good.” She grabbed the beaver by its hind legs, and Shauna silently grabbed its shoulders.

They looked at each other one last time over the pummeled dripping beaver, and Shauna noticed that while the fear in Natalie’s gaze had grown, so had the respect.

Shauna decided it would have to do.

## 18. Sacrifice

The clearing was busy when they made it in with the large beaver. So, they got to experience loud cheers and cries as they brought it through the trees.

“A little help here!” Natalie snapped as no one came forward to grab the animal with them.

“Put it on the table. Might as well try to keep the shed clean,” Shauna said, as a few came over.

She breathed out a sigh and exchanged nods with Natalie.

“What happened to it?” Tai asked, a disgusted grimace on her face.

“The Wilderness has given us a gift,” Shauna called out, eyes blank and grin wide. “We found this animal already killed and waiting just at the lake nearby. We’ll give our thanks tonight!”

An enormous cheer went out.

Tai turned to her with a scowl. The other girl opened her mouth, but in the end she just shook her head and walked away.

Shauna frowned at her back. She knew Tai didn’t like The Wilderness thing, but you’d think she’d at least be happy about getting food.

The crinkling of the grass nearby distracted her, making her turn to see a smiling Jackie walking closer.

Her expression changed to a deep frown as she jogged the last few steps to Shauna. “What happened to your lip?” Jackie asked, grabbing her chin.

“Nothing,” Shauna said and pushed her hand away, rougher than she would’ve been if her mood was better. “It was just an accident.”

Jackie’s frown deepened. She glanced down at the hand Shauna slapped away. “Can you at least let someone look at it?” she asked, looking back up at the split in her lip.

Jackie’s stare was too sharp and searching. It felt like her eyes were physically poking her.

Shauna breathed out through her nose. Jackie hovering over her, and everyone else’s close presence around her workspace were agitating her.

“I’m fine, Jackie,” she snapped. Jackie flinched, brow furrowing.

She noticed Natalie, still nearby, looking at her with a deep frown. Shauna glared at her nosiness, but ignored her for now to focus on Jackie.

Shauna just needed some time alone to process, and all these fucking people weren’t giving it to her. She forced her tone to soften. “I just…” She looked away, rubbing her forehead. “I’m okay. It’s nothing. Can you let me work on this?”

Jackie still looked dejected. Shauna didn't mean to hurt her feelings, but her clinginess and how overprotective she could get drove her crazy sometimes.

There was no way in hell Shauna could ever say that out loud, though. They'd been good—great, even—since Jackie… showed her that sometimes, it was nice to let her be in charge. And there was something healing about hearing Jackie say she 'loved her more than anything' and knowing she meant it how Shauna wanted her to.

So Shauna was going to try. For her.

She stepped closer and Jackie's tiny hurt pout lifted slightly. Shauna sighed to herself. Jackie better appreciate this.

Shauna leaned in so her mouth was to a curious Jackie's ear. "Can you give me some space… *please*…" she muttered, tone petulant.

Jackie leaned back, eyes wide. She stared at Shauna. Her eyes roaming her face like she wanted to make sure it wasn't secretly someone else.

Shauna scowled, looking away, her face flushing. She was a second away from asking if Jackie heard what she said.

Jackie's lips lifted into a fond smile. She stepped forward, hugging Shauna and kissing her cheek.

Shauna's arms came up around in her return, brow furrowing, but relieved Jackie had stopped looking upset.

Jackie leaned away, giving Shauna one last kiss on the nose before stepping back. "Okay, Shipman. No problem. Come get me when you want company again."

She walked away with a wave, basically skipping with how she bounced on each step.

Shauna stared at her as she went. Why the hell did Jackie like the word please so much? She loved a fucking weirdo.

"What'd you say to her?" Natalie asked, also watching Jackie go with a curious look on her face.

Shauna scowled. Why did Natalie care? "I'm trying to work here," she grumbled, picking up her knife, turning away to start in on the beaver.

She's not telling people Jackie trained her like a fucking dog to say please.

---

There was a light breeze in the air. Green all around her. Flowers were in bloom, and animals were back.

Shauna nodded to an excited Javi. It was time to hunt again. In the weeks since finding the beaver, she and Javi hadn't come back empty-handed once.

He walked ahead, grinning. Shauna smiled at his back. She was happy to see how much more energy he had.

Shauna took out the hunting knife from the makeshift sheathe Jackie had lovingly made her by stitching some thick leather together. She'd given it to Shauna a few days ago and said it was a birthday gift. It was hard to believe it was already the end of March, but the thick grass and melted snow didn't lie.

She glanced at Javi again. He was still oblivious up ahead, so she cut across her palm. She cut slightly deeper than last time, hoping it'd result in a better reward than the measly two rabbits from their last hunt.

She rewrapped her hand with the cloth. Shauna needed to remember to change it out soon. Her fingers curled to test it, and she deemed it fine with a nod to herself.

"Hey! You coming?" Javi asked from up ahead, vibrating in place.

She huffed out a laugh and jogged up to him. "Yeah sorry. I got distracted."

Shauna let herself enjoy the pleasant breeze again, confident they'd have a fruitful hunt.

---

They were both smiling as they got back to the cabin. The hunt had resulted in four rabbits and two possums. A much better result than the last one.

She waved goodbye to Javi and adjusted the bag of small game over her shoulder.

Natalie walked up from where she'd been waiting nearby. "Good haul?" she asked, glancing at the large bag.

Shauna smiled and nodded, making her way to the meat shed. She didn't mind butchering the smaller game inside. They'd taken to drying any meat that was stored since winter was over, but they were still mostly living hunt to hunt.

She opened up the door and made her way in. Shauna was in such a good mood from her haul she was only a little annoyed when Natalie followed her in.

Shauna put the bag on the table inside. "What's up?" she asked, hoping it would be quick, so she could get started on this.

"We found some more animals. Claw and bite marks again," Natalie said, looking agitated like she always did when the continuing attacks came up.

Like most of her problems, Shauna couldn't seem to just ignore this one until it went away like she wanted.

"Anything big?" Shauna sighed and put her hand to her forehead.

"No, just some more small stuff. The uh—the beaver is still the biggest thing it's attacked." Natalie said, and she still sounded uncomfortable when the topic turned to that.

"Okay." Shauna nodded, pulling her hand from her head.

"I'll go add—what the hell?" Natalie stepped closer, looking worried. "Shauna, is your head bleeding?"

Shauna frowned, reaching up. She looked at her fingers and saw it came away with smeared blood. Her brow furrowed. She didn't remember hitting her head today.

A drop from her other hand fell to the floor, bleeding through her makeshift bandage. Shauna cursed. The cloth was dark. She wondered how long it'd been leaking like that. Surely she would've noticed while hunting.

She removed the cloth and clicked her tongue. Shauna had cut too deep. The blood hadn't slowed.

Natalie grabbed her hand, looking down at it with a frown. "What happened?"

Shauna tried to pull it away, and she got déjà vu from the last time Natalie found her with a cut hand as she wouldn't let go.

"It was an accident," she said, an uncomfortable grimace on her face. "Will you let go of me now?"

Shauna's heart started pounding. Fear and embarrassment that Natalie would figure out what she was doing coursing through her.

"There's healed ones too," Natalie muttered. Her finger came up and gently touched the older cuts. They varied in size. Shauna had been experimenting, trying to see if changing things made the animals differ.

The contact made her tense. Natalie had been careful, so it didn't hurt. Her fingers there just felt wrong, invasive.

"Don't do that," Shauna snapped, not able to take it anymore. She pulled her hand back with more force.

"Have you been cutting your palm open?" Natalie asked her, wide eyed.

Shauna's heart sped up, swallowing and avoiding her eye. Why did Natalie think this was any of her damn business?

"Are you—fuck's sake, Shauna. Are you cutting your hand open for the wilderness?" Natalie's eyes were wide and disbelieving.

"No," Shauna snapped. "It's self-harm." She hoped telling her that would make Natalie so uncomfortable she'd drop it.

"On your fucking palm?" Natalie said, glaring. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I thought you didn't believe in this shit, Shauna. Now you're sacrificing your blood. And I knew you sounded serious when you said that beaver was a gift!"

She had that look of judgment on her face Shauna knew was coming. It made her feel demeaned—looked down upon for her new superstition.

The anger inside woke up and settled heavily in her chest. Her jaw set, eyes flashing as she met Natalie's gaze again.

"Every time I've sacrificed blood, Javi and I have found something, Natalie. I can't just ignore that. If my blood is doing something, then I need to use it," Shauna said heatedly.

She wouldn't say she was now fully a believer in The Wilderness gods, but if all it took was a little blood each day and she got food, then why not just do it? What the fuck did it matter?

Natalie looked at her with wide eyes, shaking her head. "What's next, Shauna? You gonna sacrifice one of us if the voices from the trees ask you to?"

"I'm not hearing voices!" Shauna's voice cracked as she snapped. "I'm not crazy!"

Natalie threw her hands up, exasperated. "You've been hurting yourself to find animals, Shauna!"

Shauna tried to keep her temper in check. She breathed slowly, squeezing her injured hand into a tight fist—the pain helped ground her.

Finally, Shauna made her way around Natalie to the door.

Natalie groaned from behind Shauna, sounding both frustrated and concerned. "Listen, I'm worried about you, okay? After how you handled the beaver, and now this…"

Shauna spun around with a snarl. "We needed that beaver!"

It was tiring hearing about the damn thing. She didn't want to be reminded of what happened all the time.

"I know that! I know you didn't want to do that." Natalie's voice softened. "But now the blood sacrificing too?" Natalie's expression dropped as she searched Shauna's face, like she was trying to understand where her head was at.

Shauna groaned, turning away from the eyes scrutinizing her—not able to stand it or how condescending she's being anymore.

"We're going in circles here," she said, gritting her teeth and opening the door. "I'm going to go wrap this again. Go log where you found the dead animals."

"Don't come crying to me when the trees ask you to chop your whole fucking hand off!" Natalie yelled from behind, sounding annoyed.

Shauna didn't look back. She didn't care what Natalie thought. She didn't.

## 19. Cut

Shauna was standing in front of the fireplace studying what looked like a pile of garbage.

She glanced at Van and Gen, and then back to the heap.

Natalie nudged the junk with her foot, and Shauna wouldn't blame her if she kicked some of it into the fireplace to burn later.

"This can't be it," Tai groaned, rubbing her hands down her face.

Shauna sighed and kneeled down to look through it.

"Sorry babe, we looked everywhere." Van shrugged. "This is the only stuff in this cabin we could find for weapons."

"How does he have pliers, but no hammer?" Shauna asked with a scowl. She shuffled through things like a rusted handsaw, a small screwdriver, and a hand axe.

"How does a man have so much ammo he could supply an army, but only one rifle?" Van said, watching Shauna dig around. "Dead cabin guy's mind is endlessly fascinating."

"That's one way to put it," Tai said with an annoyed scowl.

Shauna separated the two axes in the pile, the only useful things she could see here. She took one axe for herself and handed the other to Mari nearby.

"That'll give us *some* protection from whatever the hell that thing is that's hunting here, but I was really hoping for more," Shauna said, standing and wiping her hands on her already dirty jeans.

"What are we supposed to do against a big wild animal if it comes here? Screw it to death?" Tai asked, picking up the screwdriver with a scowl.

The room filled with giggling.

Tai tossed the screwdriver down and stood, rolling her eyes. "You all knew what I meant. Shut up."

Shauna bit her lip to stop her own snickering, knowing this was serious. "Stay near the cabin and run inside, I guess."

"Great, so we're back to being locked in like it's winter." Tai shook her head, frowning.

"It's not like the axes are much help anyway with the way it's tearing through stuff. They're just so they can hopefully fight the thing off." Natalie glared into space, probably imagining the animal on the other end of it. "The rifle's our best bet if we don't want anyone getting hurt."

Mari and Melissa shuddered, and Javi gulped.

Travis stepped forward, silent until then. “Javi, you’re not going out anymore. It’s too dangerous.”

Javi’s eyes widened. “I’m not a little kid!” He puffed himself up, something actually impressive now with how much he’d grown in the past year. “Shauna and I always get the most, anyway. And she needs my help. You all do if you want to eat.”

Travis sighed, studying Javi with a frown and creased forehead. Travis’ eyes moved to her. She could see the question on his face. ‘Will you still protect Javi?’

Javi had become important to her, too. He was basically everyone’s little brother but Shauna knew Javi saw her as the closest to an actual older sister. She’d hardened herself in so many ways out there, but she tried to leave a little of the old her available for Javi.

Shauna nodded without hesitation.

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The forest had been quieter. The grass was still green, the trees still brown, and the blood still red—but it felt like everything was holding its breath with whatever the hell was out there stalking around.

Shauna and Javi hadn’t encountered any of the dead animals the others had yet, but she had doubts it’d stay that way for long.

Whatever it was seemed stealthy as all hell. It moved around with none of them seeing it yet, but it somehow made its way all over the damn place.

Javi hummed to himself as he looked at the smaller map he’d been working on lately to carry with them.

“What?” Shauna asked, hoping he’d distract her. It was boring that day. She’d been trying to be lighter on the cuts, but it was as she feared—their hunts became much less fortunate.

“I’m trying to see if I can figure out where that thing is going next,” Javi said, brow furrowed as he stared down at the paper in his hands.

Shauna smiled at him. “It’s an animal. I don’t think it has an attack pattern, Javi.”

He groaned, frowning at her. “That’s what Travis said, but you’re supposed to be on my side.”

Shauna’s brow raised. “Why am I supposed to be on your side?”

“Because it’d be rude as hell not to have your hunting partner’s back, Shauna,” he smirked at her.

Shauna nodded. “My bad. I’ll keep it in mind for the future.”

A bird cawed above, way too high for either of them to hit.

“Fuck. How many is that?” Shauna asked, scowling at the bird as it became a dot in the distance.

Javi flipped over the page. “Six.”

Shauna clenched her jaw, wishing she could somehow hit the damn things. Those six birds were the only things they'd seen so far.

By then, they'd usually have at least one kill, but it's been hours of nothing.

Shauna glanced down at her palm.

Maybe The Wilderness was mad at her. Was she not… feeding it enough? Did she do something wrong? Was this a punishment?

She needed to cut deeper again.

---

Her bandage bled through the next day, but in return, they found 4 animals.

---

Days later, the stifling warmth of the shed almost had Shauna missing the winter. The metal seemed to attract every bit of heat in the area. She even took off her flannel, but she still sweated through her shirt.

She was writing what she estimated their amount of rations were when a body draped over her back.

Shauna groaned. She was way too hot and uncomfortable to want someone hanging on her. She knew from the familiar smell of sweat and curves fitting against her it was Jackie, and it was the only reason Shauna didn't commit a murder.

Jackie stepped back, making Shauna sigh with relief. "Wowza, you're already making that noise and I barely touched you."

Shauna rolled her eyes and turned her head to look at her. "Jackie, it's hot as shit in here. I'm two seconds from heat stroke."

Jackie frowned and wiped at the sweat on Shauna's forehead. "Do you want me to get you some water?"

Shauna's eyes softened, and she leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. "Yes."

Jackie smiled and walked past her. Shauna turned back to her work, but then jumped as she felt a sharp sting and heard a smacking noise ring out as Jackie slapped her on the ass. She spun around with a glare, trying not to let the smile that wanted to break through appear.

"Really?" she shouted at Jackie's cackling back.

Shauna shook her head, and let her grin come to her lips as she stared at the numbers on the page.

It slipped into a frown as she realized it was much lower than she'd like. She felt frustration well inside her. It was like nothing she did was enough.

She could sacrifice liters of blood, but it wouldn't make a difference with that animal out there tearing through the whole forest, making the game scarce.

“One slightly warm water delivered with care,” Jackie said, handing her the cup as Shauna idly played with her pencil and stared down at the page like the numbers would change.

“Thank you,” she muttered as she reached out to grab it.

Terrible pain exploded from her palm as she gripped the cup. Shauna cried out, dropping the drink.

She hadn’t been paying attention and grabbed it with the wrong hand.

Jackie scrambled close, looking at her with panic. “What? What’s wrong?”

Shauna squeezed her eyes shut. She breathed out through her nose with a harsh breath. “My hand.”

Jackie grabbed her palm and unwrapped the bandage. “You mean the one you’ve been wearing something over for weeks now that magically won’t heal?”

Shauna opened her eyes and stared at Jackie as she looked down at her slowly bleeding palm. “You didn’t say anything,” Shauna said quietly.

“Have you been keeping this clean, Shauna?” Jackie asked with a worried frown.

“I try,” Shauna muttered, feeling scolded even though Jackie hadn’t berated her. She’d only shown intense care and worry. Something about that felt even worse.

At least her gaze and hands on her palm didn’t feel uncomfortable in the same way Natalie’s had.

Jackie picked up the cup lying on its side and spilled out the little amount of water still inside onto Shauna’s hand. There was something so much more soothing about it when Jackie did it.

“Why are you doing this, Shauna?” Jackie asked, sounding exhausted.

“It’s the only way animals appear when we hunt,” Shauna muttered, looking down at her feet. She felt profoundly stupid saying it out loud, but the results were stored behind her and spoke for themselves.

A sniffle came from Jackie. Shauna’s head whipped up. She was crying, staring down at Shauna’s palm.

“You’re not going to stop? Are you?” Jackie asked. She looked resigned, like she was just told she was terminal.

Shauna’s chest ached. She caused this. Her answer didn’t change, though. They needed food, and her blood sacrifice fed them.

Shauna knew it did. She’d tested it.

She didn’t do a sacrifice, and because of that, they didn’t catch a thing that day.

Going back to camp afterward, seeing the downtrodden faces, seeing *Jackie’s* disappointment. Shauna would’ve cut off her hand just as Natalie warned her about if it meant she’d get one fucking rabbit to appear.

“No,” Shauna said, gazing at Jackie staring down at her hand.

A tear fell onto the middle of her palm.

“Okay,” Jackie nodded, looking back up at her. “But I’m cleaning it as soon as you get back from hunting from now on.”

Shauna flexed a few of her fingers, Jackie holding on tighter in return. Her glare turned stubborn. Shauna smiled. “Alright, you can clean it.”

Jackie’s shoulders slumped in relief, eyes closing as she steadied herself.

She opened them again, looking down at Shauna’s bleeding palm, deep in thought. A few moments passed in peaceful silence.

Then Jackie picked up Shauna’s palm and brought it closer, pressing a gentle kiss to its center. Shauna’s breath hitched, tears coming to her eyes—she hadn’t realized how much she wished Jackie could just kiss it and make it all better.

Jackie pulled back. Shauna wiped the blood from her lips with the thumb of her uninjured right hand. She started to pull away, but Jackie caught her wrist.

Slowly, her tongue flicked out. She licked away the red painting Shauna’s thumb. Her gaze was heavy, unreadable.

Shauna swallowed. A brief silence stretched between them, her mind racing. She hoped Jackie didn’t ask her to stop her sacrifices—she’d agree to anything she asked of her right now.

Jackie grabbed her hand, squeezing it, and pulled her toward the cabin. Shauna’s head was full of Jackie. It was the first time in days she didn’t feel overwhelmed.

Shauna wondered if it was her plan all along to leave her too dazed to argue about taking a break.

## 20. Javi

There was a numbness in the center of Shauna's palm. A sort of jagged circle where she couldn't feel it as she ran her fingers along the skin. She tried to use the knuckle from her other hand to measure how big it was, but gave up when she kept opening her cuts again by being too rough.

It made today's sacrifice easier than usual. Too easy even. Shauna thought she may have cut further than she ever had before by mistake.

Now her hand was dripping everywhere, and she felt like a fucking idiot.

"What happened? Did you fall when I wasn't looking or something?" Javi asked, looking down at her hand, disturbed.

Shauna bit the inside of her lip. She glanced around, pretending to search for an animal when she was really looking for an escape.

She found neither.

Shauna sighed. "I pulled a stitch. Don't worry about it."

Javi raised a disbelieving brow as he stared at her hand dripping red blood onto the healthy green forest floor.

Shauna shook her head and gestured forward. "Let's just go."

She tore off a strip of fabric from the bottom of her flannel, and it came off easy with how delicate all their clothes were. She still mourned the loss, but she was glad that at least it wasn't one of the ones Jackie liked to share with her.

Shauna unwrapped the one on her hand and threw it to the ground. She ignored the squelching noise it made and the flecks of blood that flew from it, already preparing the new one.

The longer strip darkened, but it didn't start dripping, so she considered it a win.

She raised her hand, waving it right in Javi's face, trying to be as irritating as possible. "Better?"

He batted it away, scowling at her. The way his lips kept trying to twitch upward betrayed him, though. "You're so annoying," he grumbled.

Shauna smirked, shrugging at him and continuing toward their destination.

Javi grumbled and followed her.

He took out his custom map, still trying to figure out a pattern for the animal's attacks. Shauna had to admire his dedication at least. She'd looked at it herself and there was no rhyme or reason to it she could see.

Shauna glanced at it to see he'd started drawing lines between destinations.

“What are those for?” she asked, frowning down at it.

“I drew a line between kill sightings.” He pointed down at it. “See, there’s little numbers too.”

Her brow furrowed. Something about it seemed to scream at her, as if she was missing something obvious.

Shauna glanced between the numbers, hoping it’d come to her soon. “How many are there in total?”

“Thirteen.”

“Unlucky,” she muttered. Her eyes looked for number one, saw it was the lake, and then went to two. The map marked it about three miles southeast of the cabin.

She remembered finding some rabbits there weeks ago.

They climbed over a fallen tree trunk. Her makeshift bandage caught on the trunk and ripped away.

Shauna cursed, pulling it away from the bark. She re-wrapped it, grumbling to herself.

“Where was three?” Shauna asked, opening and closing her fist.

“Two miles from the cabin. North.”

She looked over at the map. “A possum,” she murmured.

“Huh?” Javi asked, brow furrowed.

“We caught a possum there, remember?” she said, pointing at it.

She looked at four. Hare.

Five. Porcupine.

Six. Squirrel.

Seven.

Javi gasped. Shauna lifted her head from looking at the map, and then, around the next bend, she saw it.

Blood. A lot of it.

Now that Shauna was paying attention, she could even smell the iron in the air with the amount.

She walked closer. Javi stayed back, head swiveling around. Shauna kneeled down next to the carcass, and it was hard to tell what she was looking at. Whatever killed it had torn apart and eaten most of the animal.

“Shauna,” Javi said. She turned to see him kneeling down and holding up a tuft of orange-reddish hair. “It was a fox, I think.

She nodded. That’d be her best guess too.

Shauna stood and examined the area. They hadn't been there for a while, so her theory held no weight. She had never been so relieved to be wrong before.

"Let's head back," Javi muttered, looking around skittishly.

Shauna nodded, eyes flicking around.

She walked up to him and grabbed her knife. She handed it over, pretending not to notice his wide, wondering eyes at holding her prized possession.

"Just in case," she said, taking the unused axe she'd had strapped to her belt loop.

He swallowed and nodded, squeezing the grip.

They walked back the same way they came. It was still mid afternoon, so the sun was high in the sky. The part of the forest they were in was dense though, so it was shadowed where they were, with only little pockets of light here and there.

Shauna and Javi were careful on every step, like they had some innate fear of grabbing the wrong thing's attention.

The tree trunk from earlier that Shauna's bandage got caught on was ahead. She made her way over it again. Her shoes scraped against the bark, the sound loud in the forest's quiet.

She paused, waiting for Javi. Shauna breathed in deep, the scent of pine and nature becoming stuck in her nose. They exchanged nods as he made his way over, and Shauna felt jittery.

Her hand tightened around the axe, her breath picking up. Javi's did the same next to her.

It felt like something was pressing in on her—a weight holding her down, constricting her chest.

Shauna flinched as Javi squeezed her arm. She exhaled, her heart slowing. Her eyes darted around. There was nothing.

She was being paranoid.

They kept walking, and the pressure stayed.

The quiet of the forest felt eerie, like everything there had hid away.

The sweat from her brow dripped down into her eyes, and she wiped it away with her injured hand.

Her face was sticky. Shauna cursed. Her blood still seeped through the bandage. She was pretty sure she just wiped it on herself like a fool.

Shauna's eye caught a splatter of red on the ground. Her heart sped so fast she felt sick.

They walked closer to it, the only sound the crunch of their footsteps. She smelled iron again.

As she got closer, she realized what it was. It'd been where she threw her old bandage.

It was gone. Only the splatter from its wet plop remained.

That force pushing down on her increased. She had to stop herself from running. The forest stayed silent. Now the only sounds were their fast breathing.

Shauna whipped her head around. It felt like they weren't alone anymore. Her hand tightened around the axe. Her other hand into a fist. A drop of blood fell.

An explosive snarl went out from behind Shauna.

Javi knocked into her from the side, shouting, "Watch out!"

She fell to the floor with a grunt. Her hip smacked into the ground, followed by the rest of her body, the axe tumbling from her grip.

She heard the thundering of footsteps, and then a large shadow passed over Shauna.

It released another loud, furious growl. The sound of skidding and trampling dirt came from its direction as it forced itself to stop.

After weeks of this, she'd get to see what's been causing them all so much trouble. The animal turned.

It was a feline. A short sandy coat covered its corded muscle. The fur under its chin and jaw was white, and it had black highlights on its face and ears. The most striking part of it was the glaring green eyes narrowed in her direction.

A cougar.

Shauna's breath increased. A prey instinct she'd never felt before occurred under that stare. She wanted to curl up into a ball and hide her face until it went away.

It released a loud hiss, like a snake invaded its body just to make sure Shauna knew she was completely screwed.

The cougar's legs bunched, and then it shot forward. One second, it was twenty feet away, the next, it was right in front of her.

She could smell it. The natural animal musk coming from it—like a zoo but times ten.

Shauna lay there, on her belly, frozen. Too stupid to move.

The cougar planted its claws in front of her. She blinked. They were at the right side of her neck. Another blink. A diagonal slash—down to where her neck met her shoulder. Then they were gone, sinking back into the dirt.

Shauna screamed. Blood rushed down. Her neck felt like it had been ripped apart.

The cougar's head reared back, preparing to snap forward.

"Shauna!" A body flew from the side and knocked the cougar away.

It was like none of her limbs would work. She could only lay there, shaking.

A terrified scream went out. Her head snapped up, and Shauna sobbed in pain, but she forced herself to look.

Tears ran down her face as she saw the cry came from Javi. He was on his back. Shauna's knife was in his hand, and he was slashing back at the animal.

The cougar kept trying to snap at Javi with his jaws, but he would slash at its face, not letting it close. He didn't have as much luck with the claws, however, and Shauna could see he was getting overwhelmed with all the incoming attacks.

The sight jolted her higher brain functions back on, and Shauna told her crazy, selfish fucking ass to get up and help him. Now!

Her limbs remembered she was in control again. She pushed herself up to her knees. Shauna slid the axe to her left injured hand, knowing her right side was worse at the moment.

The hissing and growling increased, as did Javi's cries.

Shauna gritted her teeth and squeezed the axe as hard as she could. The pain was excruciating.

She would consider it penance.

Shauna exploded into motion, throwing herself to her feet. Axe in hand, she made it over to the cougar in record time.

Her left hand lifted, and she brought the blade right onto the cougar's head.

A splatter of blood shot outwards, mixing with her own—she couldn't tell which was hers and which was the wild animal's anymore.

It released a pained cry. And this was nothing like the beaver. She didn't feel sorrow or guilt for this.

Shauna reveled in this being's pain.

It had hurt her. It had hurt Javi. It had fucked with her food for weeks.

If she had the time, she would unleash all her hate on this creature, but she didn't have that.

Her left hand came down again and again, not stopping until the cougar's anguished cries were silenced.

Finally, the animal slumped and fell still.

The disappearance of the cougar's agony left the forest silent, save for the panting breaths that left her lungs feeling cold. Shauna's hand relaxed its grip, a soft sigh of relief escaping her lips.

She'd killed it. Finally, they could stop worrying about food until winter. No more fear, no more looking over their shoulders every time they had to go outside. No more feeling like she was slowly being crushed until there was nothing left. Her body slumped—the most relaxed she'd felt in weeks.

Her glazed eyes wandered over the cougar's large, furry corpse—and then she remembered: Javi was still under it.

Alarm surged through her, and her heart, which had been settling, pounded once again.

She hurried to the cougar's side, kicking it away from Javi so he could breathe. The animal puffed up dirt as it landed. She noticed her knife was still stuck in its chest, and a laugh

choked out from her throat.

Shauna knelt, and then she leaned forward, taking her knife back.

Her smile widened as she turned to Javi, already imagining how shocked and impressed Travis would be once he heard his little brother helped Shauna take down a cougar.

Shauna's gaze reached his face, and her smile shrunk.

He was staring. Eyes wide open, looking up into the sky.

She licked her lips. Her body felt numb even as her heart rate increased for reasons unknown to her.

"Javi, what are you looking at?"

He didn't answer.

Shauna's head whipped up, trying to understand what he saw.

She grabbed her neck at the agony of moving it but ignored her tears. Shauna needed to see what was so interesting.

There wasn't anything there. Just the canopy of large green trees.

Shauna scrambled to Javi on her hands and knees. Her breath increased. Quick, panicked ones in and out.

She leaned over him. Her own teary eyes locked with his unblinking ones.

"Javi… Javi, what are you looking at?"

Why wouldn't he stop staring?

With a tremble, she pressed her hand to his chest. The warmth of his skin was there, but the muscle beneath was unmoving.

Why wouldn't he breathe?

Her arm hung in the air before his throat, and nausea oozed through her.

Shauna's hand shook violently as she pressed her fingers to his neck through the sticky, warm blood, waiting to feel the soft thump-thump.

Nothing.

Why did he have no pulse?

Shauna grabbed his shoulders, squeezing as hard as she could.

She shook him—up and down, back and forth—anything to make him stop being an empty shell.

Tears dripped onto his face. Her too big emotions filled her in a way she'd never experienced before.

It was too much.

She did the only thing she could.

Shauna screamed, “JAVI!”

No answer.

## 21. Jackie

It took longer than Jackie would've liked for others to agree with her and Travis that Shauna and Javi were not just out hunting late again. In fact, it took until dinner time for people to start getting serious. Jackie would tell them they needed to make sure Shauna was okay, and one of them would tell her Shauna's magical shield would protect her, or the wilderness would, or some other lie Shauna had spun that Jackie was getting sick of hearing.

The fact Jackie still put up with all the bullshit Shauna caused with her manipulative nonsense should really show how much Jackie loved her. But as dumb as Jackie thought the whole thing was, she knew they all were loyal to Shauna. When it finally got through their thick skulls, something was *wrong*, well then it was time to start yelling over each other and arguing. Without Shauna, most of them were acting like ducklings who lost their mother.

If she was in a more cynical mood, Jackie would say they only started caring when they realized the butcher wasn't there to get them their food. It was hard to believe that though, when Jackie saw how distressed Shauna's followers were. Jackie might've even stepped up herself to take control of the situation if she could think past: *Shauna is missing. Shauna is missing. Shauna is missing.*

It was Natalie who whistled to get everyone's attention. "We're going to search for them, but we don't know where that thing is, so I don't want too many people. Any volunteers?" Natalie asked. She was shifting back and forth, her fingers drumming on the rifle in her grip as she tried to do this as fast as possible.

Everyone raised their hands. Jackie couldn't tell whether it was because of Shauna, or because of Javi, but it was probably the most they'd all ever agreed on something.

Tai stepped forward with a scowl. "I'm going."

Natalie nodded without hesitation.

Jackie stepped forward too, her arms crossed. She didn't feel the need to speak. She figured the serious, narrow eyed look she had pointed at Natalie said enough.

Natalie groaned. "Goddammit. Fine. But you better stick close to me, Jackie. I'm serious. Shauna would kill me if something happened to you."

She nodded, not really caring who she had to be next to as long as it led to her finding Shauna. The angry, insane, emotionally inept love of Jackie's life, whose death at the end of this would cause Jackie to kill herself without hesitation.

Travis was pacing back and forth. He whipped his head toward them, teeth gritted. "That's plenty. Let's go!"

Natalie sighed, dark circles under her eyes and furrowed brows. "Alright, stick close guys."

The four filed outside, antsy.

“Do we have any idea on where they are?” Tai asked, gaze darting around like Shauna could just be right behind a tree if they’d only looked closer.

Natalie sighed, her relief palpable. “Yeah, luckily Shauna actually remembered to tell us before leaving this time. They planned to go a mile and a half west of here.”

Jackie would’ve been sprinting away as soon as she heard the word ‘west’, but unfortunately for her, she had no clue which way that was.

Travis didn’t seem to have that issue himself though, as he sped away—Jackie hot on his tail.

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The stars out in these woods were so bright. So different from their dimmer counterparts out in civilization. There was something so majestic and ancient when Jackie looked up and saw them out there.

Jackie *hated* them.

She despised how bright and numerous they were. She detested how impossible they were to avoid if you went outside at night. But mostly, she hated how much they reminded her that this was *not* home.

Jackie would do all the stupid wilderness stuff Shauna wanted from her. She’d sew and pull her weight. She’d even keep her head down and not bring the attention to herself she still sometimes craved. But she refused to pretend that she *liked* it out here. If it wasn’t for Shauna, she probably would’ve killed herself months ago and been having a very relaxing time in the afterlife instead.

The point was, Jackie hated the stars out here with a passion, but on this night, she could at least *appreciate* them. Without them and the half-moon, she wouldn’t have been able to see a thing when searching for Shauna—and Javi, she had to remind herself. Again.

She knew what most people thought. That she was selfish, but most people were wrong. Jackie Taylor was not selfish. She was in love. She was devoted. Van almost burnt to death because of said devotion, and she would’ve done the same no matter who was in that seat if it meant Shauna didn’t get hurt.

So, she hoped that if one of them had to be dead, it would be Javi. Not because she was cruel. Jackie didn’t *want* Javi dead. She liked Javi. She thought Javi was sweet. But she also wanted *nothing* more than for Shauna to be alive and in her arms.

Travis’ longer legs and determination let him keep pace ahead. If Jackie was in better shape—not half starving, not having had seven months of being pregnant, not having had been sedentary even longer, back aching, fingers cramping over her sewing kit—she could’ve kept up with him at an easy jog. As it was, she was already tired, and feeling like absolute garbage about herself, as Natalie was definitely slowing her pace to keep near her.

The area of the forest they entered next had thick trees covering the sky, and Jackie may hate the sight of the stars, but she preferred that to it being almost pitch black.

Travis had his own lantern ahead, jolting back and forth with his frantic movement, and Tai held the other one near them. She seemed less patient than Natalie was with Jackie's slower footsteps, but she didn't say anything to her or run ahead to leave them both in the dark, either.

At one point, Tai had even held her hand out to help Jackie over a thick log. Tai looked at her with a softer expression than was typical for her and squeezed her palm after she got to the other side. Jackie thought it might've been the most they'd ever connected as people.

"Are we close?" Jackie asked, breathing heavier than them both.

Natalie glanced around, eyes narrowed. "It's hard to tell with how fucking dark it is out here, but I think the landmark for this place is ahead."

"Javi!" Travis yelled, something he's been doing since they passed the cabin tree line, so much so his voice had already turned hoarse.

But then, something changed.

"J-Javi! Javi oh my god! Javi!" Travis screamed, sounding broken.

The lantern in his hand bounced wilder than ever as he started sprinting. The tone made something in Jackie flare to life. Panic, fear, dread. All of it shot through her at once.

She and Tai ran forward together, and she cursed Tai's longer legs as she pulled ahead of Jackie and nearer to the light of Travis' lantern. They both skidded to a stop when they reached him. Travis crouched with wide eyes, his body trembling and tears leaking. He was trying to get closer to two figures on the ground against a tree.

The first, the one Jackie would always notice before any other—no matter the circumstances—was Shauna.

She was pale, eyes glazed, and stiff. Her body leaned against the tree, and the knife in her hand was very steady as she held it up near Travis' throat from where he tried to move closer. Her other arm wrapped around a figure in the lap of her raised knees. And Jackie knew she needed therapy, and *fast*, because her first thought when she saw this tableau was to question why Shauna allowed someone else to lounge in her lap when that spot was Jackie's.

Shauna's eyes didn't seem to recognize them as anything other than a threat. That Shauna thought Jackie would or could ever hurt her made a gnawing emptiness sprout in her stomach that seemed intent on eating her from the inside.

Natalie finally made it to them—her rifle making any run awkward—and the curse she yelled was so loud, it rose above the sound of bugs buzzing in the area.

The noise broke Jackie from her stupor and she shook her head at herself, annoyed she'd think to hesitate when it was *Shauna*. Jackie's Shauna. Shauna could hold a gun to her head, and Jackie knew she'd still be unable to resist her call.

She bounded forward, ignoring Tai trying to grab her and Natalie's, "Jackie don't!" to fall down next to a wide eyed Shauna staring at her. The hand with a knife in it slowly lowered, and Jackie helped it along by pushing it away. As soon as it was fully out of the way, Jackie practically fell into Shauna. She burrowed into her side like one of the rabbits Jackie loathed.

Then, her tears flowed onto Shauna's neck. Jackie's relief at seeing her alive made her tears fall even faster.

But the problem was, Shauna didn't seem actually *okay*. Jackie could tell something was still wrong, but she didn't know what it was, or how to make it better. Jackie wanted so desperately to be able to fix it. She wanted to be the one who listened to her worries while holding her close. Jackie wanted to be the one who could protect Shauna if someone tried to hurt her.

Jackie might not be able to do much of anything physically strenuous at the moment, but seeing Shauna like this. Seeing her so unlike herself, so fragile and terrified, it told Jackie that she would need to make some changes going forward. Shauna had kept her safe for so long out there. She did so much for her. It made Jackie need to return the favor so fiercely that she wouldn't be surprised if there was a new sign around her neck that said 'Shauna's Protector.'

Now she just needed Shauna to know it was Jackie, and that she was safe, so they could go back to the cabin and Jackie could hold her in the bed they shared tighter than she ever had before.

Travis shuffled closer, and Shauna's left arm came up. She had switched knife hands so she could pull Jackie closer to her by the shoulder in a firm, reassuring grip. Shauna's eyes were narrow, studying Travis' every breath, and her lips lifted, showing sharp teeth gnashing together like she would use them instead if Travis somehow avoided her knife. She looked more feral than ever—as if now she had to keep both Javi *and* Jackie safe.

Jackie's tears ran down her face, and she lifted her head from the right side of Shauna neck to look at her, about to plead with her to calm down so she could help her.

Shauna took one look at her, and then her hand dropped her knife as if she didn't care about it at all. As if she didn't keep it on her at all times and berate people if anyone other than Jackie held it—and even then Shauna would watch her with a piercing stare, like she would somehow break it just by touch alone.

Both of her hands came up and gripped Jackie's cheeks. The trembling in Shauna's limbs increased and her fingers became tight and painful as she stared at Jackie like she just saw her own demise.

"What happened? Who hurt you? Tell me. Please. I'll fix it. Show me where it is and I'll make it better," Shauna said, eyes wide as they searched her face with wild flicks.

A bucket of ice went down Jackie's spine. The sight of Shauna so panic-stricken scared her, especially as she didn't understand why.

Travis scrambled forward and snatched Javi from Shauna's lap, and she turned to snarl at him—like an animal, like something so much worse than even Shauna's typical aggression. Her hands stayed glued to Jackie's face though, the need to clutch onto her seeming to supersede even her instinct to protect Javi from intruders.

Jackie twitched, confusion mounting. It took her a second to register the unfamiliar sensation of something thick on her skin. Her brows furrowed, and she stopped looking into Shauna's desperate unseeing eyes to examine her more closely and see what had transferred from her to Jackie instead.

She started at the top. Shauna's hair was wild and unkempt, her face so laser focused Jackie knew if it was anyone else, she'd feel uncomfortable with the stare. Her eyes traveled down further and then she noticed what she realized was obvious—but Jackie had never been the most observant.

Shauna's neck. Her beautiful pale neck Jackie enjoyed lathering with attention and nibbling on. It was in tatters. The right side featured four new claw marks.

They started higher, almost level with the bottom of Shauna's ear, except further back, near where the right side of her neck sloped into the back. Four jagged little starts to what marred something Jackie considered perfection. They then cut through her skin—the sight and thought making Jackie's breath hitch—sloping sharply downward in a diagonal, all the way to where neck met broad shoulder.

Jackie's tears came faster. Her hand moved up as if to soothe Shauna, but a voice stopped her before she could.

"Jackie! Misty needs to clean that. Don't touch it." Tai snapped from nearby.

And Taissa was right—and that fact was much less bitter than usual when it was associated with protecting Shauna.

Jackie placed her hands over Shauna's, still resting on her face, clutching them tight—refusing to let Shauna pull away even if she wanted to. Her eyes finally flicked to the side, wanting to know what was going on, and she realized she'd missed a lot when she was in her own little world with Shauna.

Travis had hunched over Javi—Javi, who Jackie noted *wasn't breathing*.

Jackie's hands tightened around Shauna's, and Shauna's grip on her cheeks tightened in return, sending a grounding ache through her face Jackie appreciated.

It brought her thoughts back into order so she could try to understand what else was happening. Near Travis and Javi stood Tai and Natalie, silently tying some large animal Jackie couldn't make out onto a sturdy branch they found nearby. Jackie's eyes studied it. The large, thick body and the claws she could just make out glinting in the small amount of moonlight available.

She wanted to stand up and beat it with her fists, kick it while it was down, spit on it so it knew just how great her disrespect was. Jackie wanted to do so many things she would've never even contemplated doing before getting stuck in this disgusting hellscape.

"Jackie, you need to get her to move," Natalie said as she and Tai were finishing up getting the animal ready.

She turned back to Shauna and her hand let go of the one on her face to run her fingers through Shauna's soft, thick hair in the way Jackie knew she loved. Shauna's body slumped, the hands on Jackie's cheeks loosened, and her eyes softened. She looked more like the Shauna that Jackie knew. All she needed was a broody little scowl, and it'd be perfect.

Jackie used Shauna's calmer inattentive state to her advantage. She wondered if this was how dog owners felt when they had to distract their pet with a treat to get it to listen to them.

She stood up, the loosened hands on her face drifting away with the motion, and Shauna looked up at her with wide-eyed betrayal.

Jackie thought there was more brain function coming to Shauna other than just basic instinct like 'guard from threats.' But it was still hard to tell what part was delirium, and what part was some kind of stress response. The other girl jumped up, knife in hand, and put herself in front of Jackie like she thought someone was about to leap at them.

Jackie sighed and grabbed her from behind, squeezing her waist tight and kissing between her shoulder blades before putting her lips near her ear. "It's okay, Shauna. It's just Tai and Natalie," she whispered.

The names seemed to have gotten through, as her body slumped.

"Is she okay?" Tai asked, brow furrowed, looking at Shauna with equal parts worry and wariness.

"Does she look okay?" Natalie snapped, tightening the last makeshift rope around the animal.

Jackie ignored her, looking at Tai. "I don't think she's thinking clearly right now, and the blood loss isn't helping."

Tai still seemed worried, but her shoulders dropped, more relaxed.

"What?" Jackie asked, eyes narrowed, sneer breaking through.

Tai examined her expression and shook her head. She looked exhausted, but Jackie would save her sympathy until she got an answer on why Tai seemed to think this was a *good* thing.

"Blood loss means it's a physical reaction. It means she hasn't… completely lost it," Tai said, voice softening as she went on.

Jackie's body loosened. She was glad to know it wasn't some kind of relief at seeing Shauna injured—which, in retrospect, was a stupid assumption to make of Taissa. But Jackie also wasn't sure she liked the fact Tai looked so shaken over whatever else was going on with Shauna.

They'd all gone a little nuts out there, hadn't they? And Jackie could see it, how much this responsibility weighed on Shauna. She'd even contemplated begging her to stop sometimes, but she was worried Shauna might actually have a breakdown if she lost the new role and drive she'd found out there.

So, if Shauna was going to turn a little crazy, then Jackie would just love that crazy. It was what she'd always done over the years. If something changed with Shauna, she just had to force her heart to grow bigger so she could love that, too. As long as she had Shauna's love to feed on, Jackie knew she'd never run out of room for her.

She only hoped the love she gave Shauna was enough to sustain the other girl when she consumed Jackie's in return.

Tai and Natalie lifted the animal, and Jackie latched onto Shauna's left arm, pulling her forward from where she still stood dazed. Shauna didn't fight her on it. She didn't even twitch when Natalie handed Jackie the lantern to hold next to them, and what she could see now was

a cougar. Jackie would need to contemplate the terror—and attractiveness—of Shauna killing a cougar when she wasn't worried Shauna would fall over from her injuries.

Her eyes tracked a silent Travis ahead, clutching Javi to his chest, and her mind returned to something she didn't have time to think about earlier. Jackie swallowed, a feeling of grief and sympathy, and sadness, and many other unpleasant emotions she couldn't hope to name rising in her chest.

She looked at Natalie, steady by her side even with the heavy branch atop her shoulder. "Is he…" Jackie trailed off, not sure if she wanted the answer. She was pretty sure she knew it, anyway.

Natalie's jaw clenched. She nodded.

Jackie looked forward again, and she felt complete and utter shame in herself. Her first thought wasn't about Travis, or how much Javi didn't deserve this—it was about Shauna, and how much Jackie knew this hurt her.

That's what it always came down to with her: Shauna, Shauna, Shauna. Jackie had accepted it years ago. She'd become comfortable with it, happy even, but she still felt guilt well up inside as she looked again at Travis stiffly holding Javi.

Shauna shook the left arm that Jackie clutched like a lifeline out of her grip. She didn't even have the time to feel hurt before the arm curled around her shoulders instead. Jackie sighed with relief, and noticed the faintest hint of clarity returning to Shauna's eyes.

Jackie forgot all about her guilt and shame. Others may judge her for what she considered most important, but they didn't matter. Her priorities in life shifted when Jackie met Shauna at 5, and she planned to have it stay that way until she was 95 and dying next to her.

Jackie shuffled in as close as she could to Shauna, and the arm around her pulled her in even tighter—like Shauna knew and agreed with Jackie's attempt to meld their bodies together for eternity.

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They all trudged along, the lanterns their only guide. The forest still stood shadowed where they were, but ahead she could see a break in the trees and moonlight shining down. Jackie wondered if it was a sign of better times to come.

They stepped forward, into the bright light of the half-moon and those stars Jackie wanted to dim, and in that light, she could see everything so much more clearly.

The gruesomeness of Shauna's injury that stood stark and red against pale white skin. The thickness of the marks on her neck that would no doubt scar horribly.

There was a a ferocity and increasing wild look to Shauna now. It came with the thick claw marks on one side of her neck and the undeniable human teeth indents on the other—the bite that Jackie had found little pleasure in the physical act of giving. But it hadn't mattered, as the sight of Shauna's gratification while doing it made Jackie feel more satisfaction than words could describe, anyway.

The cougar, its head almost chopped to pieces with the harsh strikes of whatever Shauna killed it with. The crimson blood still leaking, even hours later.

And finally, the view of Travis' shaking back and the small, peeking head of a pale, blue-tinged Javi in his arms that made Jackie look away with nausea.

There was no hope in this light. No vision of peaceful, better days.

It was the same as Jackie had thought since the first time she saw these wild stars: there was no hiding from them, or the truth of where she really was.

## 22. Prone

"How long do I have to wear this?" Shauna asked, scowling down at the makeshift sling.

Misty rolled her eyes. "Until it doesn't hurt to move around anymore."

"Okay, it doesn't hurt anymore. Can I take it off now?" Shauna asked, while pulling at the fabric.

Natalie and Tai slapped her hand away at the same time.

She looked at them both with wide eyes.

Jackie started giggling, and Shauna turned to her with betrayal.

"Sorry, baby, but you should've seen your face." Jackie covered her mouth, still laughing.

Shauna glanced around the room. Misty shifted from foot to foot. Natalie stood with her hands in her pockets, scowling at her. Tai was next to her with her arms crossed and a judgmental brow raised.

And finally Jackie, sitting on the chair next to her bed, giggling.

Shauna's eyes passed over them all one last time before she shook her head, tired of them.

"Fine. Misty, Mom, Dad." she looked at Misty, Tai, and then Natalie. "I'll leave it alone. Now get out."

Misty shrugged and walked out of the cabin bedroom. Natalie and Tai followed after shooting Shauna venomous looks.

She heard Natalie mutter, "Why do I have to be the dad?" before the door closed behind her.

Shauna sighed and then turned to Jackie, who was studying her with soft eyes.

"What are they saying out there?" Shauna asked, tiredly.

A small scowl replaced the softness on Jackie's face, and Shauna wasn't sure if it was directed at her or the others.

"They're worried about you. Upset about Javi. Trying to comfort Travis." Jackie shrugged, looking away. "All the stuff you'd expect."

"Uh huh." Shauna looked at her with a raised brow. "Any doubt?"

Jackie huffed, glaring at her. "Really? That's what you're worried about right now?"

A spark of irritation flickered in her gut. Her patience was already fraying, and such a stupid question ground it down even more.

"Yes, I'm worried my cult followers might kill me in my sleep if they think I'm lying to them," Shauna said in a quiet hiss.

Jackie rubbed her forehead. “They’re all mourning and worried about you. That’s all.”

“Well, can you let me know if anything changes?” Shauna said, scowling down at the blanket over her legs. She felt useless and hated it.

“Fine.” Jackie rolled her eyes.

“I mean it, Jackie.”

“I said ‘fine’, didn’t I?” Jackie snapped.

Shauna eyed her, and thought about trying to press to make sure Jackie understood the gravity here, but left it. For now.

Instead, she grabbed Jackie’s arm and pulled her forward, making her stumble onto the side of the bed.

“You can try to use your words, y’know?” Jackie said, scowling as she straightened herself.

Shauna glared at her, hackles raised. She needed something, but she couldn’t verbalize it or define it yet. For now, she wanted Jackie to stop talking and to lie down with her.

She took a deep breath, calming herself.

“Go to bed,” Shauna grumbled.

Jackie rolled her eyes and climbed in next to her. “Good enough, I suppose,” she muttered.

Shauna ignored her, moving closer to her, and then making an annoyed noise in the back of her throat when she realized she’d have to maneuver with this stupid sling on.

She glowered at it, contemplating taking the thing off.

“Shauna, relax and go to sleep,” Jackie said with a small worried furrow between her brows.

Shauna glared at her, and then at the sling, and then into space because nothing else was there.

She paused, closing her eyes, and breathed deeply, trying to get over the unsettled feeling hiding deep under her skin.

“Are you ok—”

The question interrupted her attempt to calm down, and her skin crawled again

“I’m fine,” Shauna snapped. She decided she wouldn’t be able to fix the feeling tonight and turned over.

Jackie shifted around behind her. Then an arm wrapped around Shauna, and breath hit her neck.

Shauna’s heart rate sped up. Her chest tightened, making it harder to get air into her lungs.

The breath on her nape was like a death sentence she couldn’t avoid as memories flashed through her head.

A cougar breathing on her neck as it got ready to bite. Javi with that same cougar on top of him—tearing him to pieces as Shauna laid there and watched. His sightless eyes looking up at nothing.

Shauna flinched away and slid as far as possible. “Turn over,” she snapped.

The bed shifted behind her. “I—what?” Jackie’s voice was confused and hurt.

Shauna felt like shit, and didn’t know what she even wanted. She needed Jackie, but she also didn’t want Jackie breathing on her neck or being that close. She was feeling—Shauna didn’t know how the hell she was feeling right now.

Jackie didn’t move for a few seconds, and then Shauna heard her shifting, and her voice sounded further away and even more upset as she said, “I—um. I-I rolled over. Is that better, Shauna?”

Her shoulders relaxed, no longer expecting something bad to happen.

“Yes,” she muttered. It still wasn’t right, but at least now she didn’t feel like she was two seconds away from grabbing something heavy to attack Jackie for breathing on her.

The room silenced, and Shauna closed her eyes, but they popped back open again as she heard a light sniffle behind her.

Shauna’s skin heated, a large bolt of hatred going through her. For herself, for the cougar, for Jackie—crying when it was Shauna who should be breaking down, not her.

Another sharp breath went out behind her, and her eyes squeezed shut, feeling guilty for getting mad at Jackie for having emotions.

She sat with the feeling, hoping it’d make her calm down.

Instead, she had to grit her teeth together getting angry again, pinging from one emotion to the next like her body couldn’t seem to decide how to act.

She whispered, “Get a hold of yourself,” and clenched her fists.

Only when her heart rate slowed to a normal level, did Shauna look over her shoulder to see Jackie’s trembling back in the dim room. The sight made it feel like someone had reached into her chest and crushed her heart.

She had no clue what to do. Shauna could barely keep a lid on her own feelings right now. How was she supposed to help Jackie with hers, too?

Her breath released out of her nose, steady and soothing—the action helping her calm down and think.

Shauna swallowed, and hesitated, then she slid backward in the bed, pressing her back to Jackie’s. The trembling and tears stopped.

The back against hers slumped, a small sigh going out behind her.

There was something about not looking at someone that made you able to speak your mind more. Shauna had been holding onto this for hours now, and maybe she wanted Jackie to understand. Maybe Shauna hoped it would help.

“It was my fault,” Shauna whispered.

Jackie stayed silent, and Shauna didn’t want to speak until she knew she was listening. She didn’t want to say this again.

There was the sound of shifting behind her, and she could just barely hear Jackie’s steady breathing.

Finally, after almost a minute of silence, Jackie spoke. “What do you mean?”

Shauna swallowed. “I figured it out before it attacked. I doubted myself because it was there early but… I don’t know, maybe my cut being so deep today made it come quicker.”

She sighed, hating herself more with every word. “Or maybe my luck just ran out, and it was nearby this time and could smell it. Or maybe…” she trailed off, afraid to say it.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Shauna. I’m sorry…” Jackie trailed off, sounding tired.

“Every sighting for it had it somewhere I’d been hunting not long beforehand. I think it was following my sacrifices,” Shauna muttered.

Her voice lowered further, now into a whisper as she couldn’t hold in the thought anymore. “It’s my fault it was even there… What if it was a punishment from The Wilderness for something I did wrong?”

Shauna had been thinking about this since she realized Javi was… dead. She had to make sense of all this.

At first, she’d thought this wilderness stuff was nonsense, just a game she made up to protect Jackie.

But then the sacrifices kept working and working. And now this? The cougar had never been there during a hunt, not in weeks, but now it’s suddenly there to attack?

What if it wasn’t a game, and The Wilderness was mad Shauna lost feeling on her palm? Did it think she wasn’t good enough anymore and wanted to replace her?

Shauna’s hand squeezed the sheets, anger and fear rolling through her at the thought of The Wilderness being fickle when she’d done so much for it.

Her hand trembled as a new theory came to mind.

Was it mad she spoke for it too much? That she stepped out of its shadow and tried to do what she wanted instead.

Fear and regret spiked through her at how angry The Wilderness must be if that was true.

Shauna murmured, “What if I deserved it…”

Jackie jabbed her hard in the side. “Shauna! Stop it!”

“But—Jackie, you don’t understand—” Shauna stuttered, rubbing her side. She didn’t care if Natalie or Tai didn’t believe her, but she needed Jackie to. What if she got hurt because of her, like Javi did?

Jackie sighed, and said, “Shauna…” she trailed off, thinking. “I didn’t want to say it, but you sound really fucking stupid right now.”

Shauna sat up, blinking. Her brain stalled.

“…What?”

“Yeah, I never would’ve thought you’d fall for something like this.” Jackie glanced up at her from the corner of her eye. The little of her expression Shauna could see looked unimpressed. “Especially when even I was smart enough not to. It’s very unattractive.”

Shauna stared at her, mouth gaping open.

Jackie was calling her stupid? *Jackie*. She was calling her stupid and gullible. And *ugly*!

Embarrassment flooded her, taking over completely. It was like Jackie just called her a weird loser and shoved her in a locker.

Shauna’s mouth opened, cheeks burning, ready to argue—then she realized that could make Jackie think she was an even *bigger* idiot than she already did. She might actually go crawl into the woods and die if she found out Jackie could think even lower of her than she did now.

Without another word, Shauna lay back down, her movements sharp and stiff. “Whatever. Shut up. Maybe it is stupid… You’re probably right.”

She was mortified, and the thought of Jackie finding her unattractive or lame made Shauna want to set herself on fire.

Shauna sighed and grumbled, “It was just the blood, like I thought at first. That’s the most logical answer, right? ’Cause, um, the woods being magic is dumb…”

Her brow furrowed as her heart calmed, but for some reason, she still felt like a fool.

Jackie’s hand came over and squeezed Shauna’s leg. “Yeah, did I ever tell you I thought your intelligence was really hot?”

Shauna’s cheeks burned with a blush, and a bit of her pride rebuilt itself under Jackie’s touch. “R-Really?”

“Yep, I think your blood theory is smart. You should see what else you can think of,” Jackie said as her thumb rubbed up and down Shauna’s thigh, the feeling distracting her.

“U-Um, okay. Sure. I’ll think of, uh, other stuff to tell you about,” Shauna said, and cursed herself for stuttering, but it was hard not to with Jackie’s praise and the hand lazily grazing her leg.

“Goodnight, Shipman,” Jackie whispered, sounding happy and slightly teasing.

“Goodnight, Jax,” Shauna murmured, her throat tight with confusion, thankful that Jackie kept her hand on top of her leg as if it were a small distracting security blanket.

It was a week later, officially summer, and Shauna walked out of her stuffy room with a large scowl and dark circles under her eyes.

She'd been staying there with Jackie since Ben's death. No one was stupid enough to argue with her about it considering she was not only in charge and "magical", but had been doing three jobs at once.

The week had been quieter since Javi's death. Food was no longer scarce, and both Shauna's shoulder and her hand have healed well. She'd even be getting the sling off today if Misty kept her word.

With her injuries, she couldn't hunt yet, but even if she could, she wouldn't sacrifice blood again.

After some thought, and because Shauna is not a gullible moron, she'd concluded that maybe she should hold off on definitively thinking The Wilderness was real.

Shauna still wasn't sure, but it didn't hurt to be careful, right?

Her doubt only grew when, without the cougar around or the need to sacrifice blood, getting food hadn't been an issue for the others.

So, for the most part, it's been better. Though there were two exceptions to this.

"Has anyone seen Jackie?" Shauna said to the people around the cabin.

She asked Jackie to tell her where she was going if she left the cabin, but she forgot as much as she remembered, and it got on Shauna's last nerve every time.

"Why is it our responsibility to babysit your girlfriend?" Travis asked, glaring at her over a book.

Problem number one.

The cabin got quiet and awkward. Eyes flicking between them, not sure what to do when their leader and her first follower fought.

Shauna sighed, trying to be patient with him, but it was hard with how much he was grating on her last nerve with this. He'd been acting insubordinate with her since Javi's death. Nothing too big. Mostly little digs here and there to challenge her authority and make her look bad.

She worried it would escalate soon, though, and she needed to deal with it.

"Jackie went out with Tai again, Shauna," Lottie said from the kitchen table.

Shauna glanced at Travis one more time, and he pretended not to notice as he went back to his book. She shook her head and walked over to where Lottie and Akilah sat.

She crossed her arms, trying not to let her aggravation show, but it was hard with how much it was boiling up.

"Didn't want to go with them this time, Lottie?" Shauna asked with a raised brow.

Lottie grimaced. "No. I don't know why Jackie still does it."

"Maybe she just wants to get back in shape," Akilah said with a shrug.

Shauna scowled. She knew Jackie's body almost as well as her own, so she was confident saying, "Jackie looks fine. Why would she need to get in shape?"

Akilah sighed, rolling her eyes, looking at Shauna with impatient annoyance. "She's still weak, Shauna. Maybe she doesn't want to rely on only you all the time."

Shauna's eyes widened. Akilah was always nice to everyone and loyal to Shauna. What the hell was that?

She glanced down to see Lottie also looking at Akilah with a dropped jaw. Shauna was relieved it wasn't just her seeing this, but now she'd have to look into what was going on.

"Uh… okay." she looked away from Akilah to Lottie. "Did they say where?"

Lottie tapped her fingers on the table a few times, glancing again at Akilah. "Yeah… I changed my mind, though. I wanna join. I'll show you."

Shauna's brow raised, but she didn't complain.

While Lottie cleaned up, Shauna glanced around and now she couldn't tell if she was being paranoid, or if there were a few people looking at her differently like Akilah was.

It looked like she had three problems now.

Shauna put her hands in her pockets and followed Lottie, a frown on her face.

"Why'd you really wanna come, Lottie?" Shauna asked, hating having to strain her neck to look up at Lottie.

Lottie hesitated, looking thoughtful. "Well… it's about Akilah."

Shauna raised a brow. She hoped that's what it was about.

"Okay, so I'm in the cabin all day, and I hear things." Lottie glanced down at Shauna. "Things that people don't say in front of Jackie."

Shauna nodded.

"I don't wanna get involved, okay? I just want to make that clear," Lottie said, looking down at Shauna with narrowed eyes. "I'm only telling you this because Jackie's my friend, and you're her… whatever the hell you two are."

"Lottie! Get to the point!" Shauna snapped.

Lottie rolled her eyes. "I don't know exactly what's being said. 'Cause y'know." Lottie vaguely waved her hand, and Shauna supposed that was one way to say you're not in a cult.

She continued, "Talk to Mari, alright. You can trust her. When Travis tried to talk shit about you, she almost punched him in the face."

Shauna nodded, lost in thought. So it was Travis, as she'd assumed.

The thought that he was stirring up something like this made a pang of hurt go through Shauna's chest. But she supposed it was only fair after she failed to protect Javi as promised.

She had to talk to Mari and figure this out before she lost everyone to Travis' grief.

Shauna had a spare thought of just cornering Travis when he was alone and killing him. Quick and easy. Not something she'd take pleasure in, but necessary if it came down to it.

Unfortunately, that'd cause way too many questions from people already losing trust in her, so the easiest route was out.

Shauna heard voices ahead, and she'd been so inattentive that she didn't even realize Lottie was just leading them to the lake.

Her jaw dropped at the scene she came across.

Jackie was in the water, panting, looking like she was about to pass out. And Tai was standing on a rock near the shore, yelling at her and throwing pine cones for her to catch.

"What the fuck?" Shauna said, wondering if she'd hit her head on the way here.

Lottie shrugged. "This is why I didn't want to join in anymore." A pine cone hit Jackie in the face. "Tai is brutal."

"You did that on purpose!" Jackie yelled, and then sputtered as water hit her in the face, too.

"No I didn't, Taylor! Next time be faster and it won't matter anyway!" Tai shouted back.

"This cannot be what they've been doing every day," Shauna said, eyes flicking between them like the scene would change soon.

"No, I quit when Tai told us to do suicides."

"Oh, she's insane," Shauna said, watching them for a few more moments.

As soon as they'd started getting a more steady supply of food, Jackie had said she'd wanted to get more physically active. Shauna had no clue why, but she didn't give it much thought beyond wondering why the hell Jackie asked Tai to help her.

Now, after she saw them doing… whatever this was, Shauna was no closer to finding the answer.

She shook her head and walked up to them.

Jackie noticed her first, and her face lit up with a grin. "Hey, Shipman! What's up?"

A pine cone hit her in the head, making her yelp. "What'd I say about paying attention, Jackie?" Tai asked with a scowl.

Shauna rolled her eyes at Taissa and pulled her arm down as she went to throw again. "You're not even trying to hit her, are you?" she asked quietly. "Your aim really is that bad."

Tai glared at her. "Get out of here. We're busy."

"Busy throwing nature at the prophet's girlfriend." Shauna shook her head. "The Wilderness is gonna get you, Tai."

Taissa scoffed and rolled her eyes.

Jackie came barreling out of the water and jumped into Shauna's arms before she could react.

“Jackie!” Shauna said, glaring as the front of her clothes were now soaked.

Tai laughed on top of her stupid rock, her eyes scrunching up with her smile.

Shauna glanced over at the water nearby and then reached up and pushed Tai forward after seeing it was deeper there.

She fell in with a large splash, water shooting out so a few drops hit Shauna too.

Tai came up sputtering, looking like an angry cat who just got made to take a bath. “Shauna!” she growled.

Shauna smirked and shrugged. “Sorry, I think The Wilderness took over me for a second there.”

“The wilderness gods aren’t real and it doesn’t even work that way!” Tai shouted as she made her way out of the water.

“How would you know? You’re not the prophet.” Shauna said, watching her stomp up to her.

Tai rang out the water in her shirt and glared at her. “Stop calling yourself the fucking wilderness prophet, Shauna!”

Shauna looked up, pretending to think about it for a moment.

She turned back to Tai and said, “No.”

Taissa looked a second away from choking her to death, and Jackie broke off from her conversation with Lottie to turn back with rolled eyes.

“Shauna, I hope you didn’t come out here just to bother Tai.”

She realized then she didn’t have a reason to be out there. Shauna had only wanted to know where Jackie was, but when Lottie offered to walk her, she agreed, hoping Lottie would know what was going on with her followers.

The detour was worth it, but now she was there for no reason.

Shauna hesitated, glancing at Lottie, who shrugged apologetically.

“Uh, Lottie told me she was coming to the lake, and I told her I’d walk her, so she didn’t have to go alone.” Shauna nodded, hoping that sounded plausible.

“You came out here because you didn’t want Lottie to walk alone?” Jackie asked slowly.

Shauna nodded and turned to Lottie, who had a deep grimace on her face, making her look almost pained.

Lottie hesitated, sighed, and then nodded to agree with Shauna.

Jackie’s eyes narrowed and her stare bore into them both. “That’s so nice of you, Shauna.” She turned to Tai, still ringing out her clothes nearby. “Isn’t that nice of Shauna?” she asked, and Jackie’s tone sounded sharper than usual, but Shauna supposed she’d also be annoyed with Tai after she threw pine cones at her.

Taissa didn’t answer, as she had a sudden need to try to get the water out of her ears too.

“Right, um.” Shauna waved and regretted the action immediately. “I’ll see you later.”

She made it a few steps away before an arm pulled her back. Jackie’s lips attached to Shauna’s, and hands clutched tight to her shoulders.

Her soft lips moved quick and aggressive against Shauna’s, and it was like Jackie was trying to suck her soul from her body.

It ended so quickly that Shauna could barely comprehend what was happening before Jackie pulled back with a grin.

Shauna looked at Jackie, dazed, brain mush, not really sure what she was doing or why.

Jackie’s grin increased at whatever expression must’ve been on Shauna’s face, and she said, “Okay, see you later, baby!”

Hands spun her body around and pushed Shauna toward that place they all lived in that she couldn’t remember the name of.

Shauna got ready for bed and flexed her freed arm with a relieved sigh.

Misty said she could remove it and it was still sore if she moved too much, but it was nothing like it was only a week ago.

The returned freedom of movement was a relief. She just hoped she didn’t pull a stitch.

It was good that it came off, as Shauna needed to go hunting again. She thought she could use it as an excuse to trade people around and get Mari as a partner, so could talk to her about Travis.

Shauna needed to handle that quickly before it got out of her control, and she had to trust Lottie when she said Mari was still loyal. She hated giving someone else so much power in this situation, but she didn’t have a choice.

She’d need to figure out a fourth person to go with her permanently, but this would work for now with how abundant animals seemed to be.

Jackie came in with a smile, eyes zeroing in on her freed arm. She sat next to Shauna and asked, “How’s it feel?”

“Not like my skin’s going to tear apart at the seams, so good enough for me,” Shauna said, slowly rolling her shoulder.

Jackie smiled and then reached forward so her finger lightly grazed Shauna’s shoulder near the claw marks. Jackie didn’t touch the actual scratches—she’d been careful not to all week.

Shauna had gotten a few stares since the bandages came off a couple days ago, but everyone mostly left her alone about it, at least.

Jackie’s finger moved downwards. Shauna was jittery, but she watched to see what Jackie planned to do.

The finger traced down Shauna’s arm, slow and steady, and finally it reached her right hand. Then Jackie just held it within her own, making Shauna smile at how nice such a small gesture felt.

Shauna relaxed in her presence, as usual. Jackie grounding her like no one else could. She was glad at least this casual intimacy was still as soothing as ever.

Jackie smiled in return, stroking the back of Shauna's knuckles with her thumb. "Do you want to try again?" she asked, voice shy. "Maybe you'll feel better with two arms."

Shauna looked down, shuffling her feet. "We can…"

Jackie brought Shauna's right hand up for a small light kiss to the palm. "You're sure?" she asked.

Shauna swallowed, thinking of her anxiety again, how panicked she kept getting over the dumbest things. But then she sighed and let herself enjoy the warmth filling her just from Jackie's light touch and kiss to her hand. She was sure she could do this.

Shauna breathed out deep, and nodded.

Jackie grabbed her hand and pulled Shauna on top of her. "Just tell me if you want to stop, okay?"

Shauna nodded and leaned down to kiss her, soft and sweet. Jackie kissed back, letting Shauna set the pace. The only thing she felt was a pleasant flickering of heat build, nothing worrying. She relaxed more into Jackie's body.

It continued like that for a while, and Shauna's anxiety disappeared. Maybe she'd just needed a few more days to get over it.

Jackie gripped her hair tighter, and her leg lifted.

Her knee knocked into Shauna's hip.

Fear knifed into her gut as a memory blazed into her mind—getting knocked onto the ground by Javi, her hip slamming into the grass, the cougar passing overhead. Her breath caught, and she wrenched herself away.

Problem number two.

Her eyes squeezed shut as her heart pounded, too fast, too loud. Not from pleasure. From panic, from guilt and shame.

Jackie pulled back and laid still beneath her. Any heat in the room vacuumed away. A few moments passed as they both sat stiff and silent.

Shauna forced her eyes open, ashamed that a tap on her hip could make her act like this.

"…Sorry," she muttered.

Jackie shook her head, slow and firm. Her hands came up and hesitated, and Shauna nodded, using all her energy not to cry.

Jackie grasped her face, thumbs running up and down her cheeks, every pass calming Shauna more. Shauna exhaled, some of her shame and anxiety drifting away with her breath.

"It's okay," Jackie said softly, "Seriously."

Shauna swallowed, not feeling like it was okay.

She wanted to finish this and make Jackie feel good. She wanted to sleep as close to Jackie as possible without getting scared because she got breathed on wrong.

She wanted to stop acting like a little bitch.

“Is there anything I can do?” Jackie asked, looking up at her with soft eyes.

Shauna met her eyes and then glanced away, cheeks turning red.

She’d been thinking about something for days now—something that might make her feel more in control. And maybe it was something she just wanted to do.

But she was afraid it might be a little much.

Shauna’s mind flew to images of Jackie spitting blood at her, and then the multiple times one of them had licked at Shauna’s blood too. She swallowed.

Maybe she was being dramatic.

Jackie looked at her curiously. “What? If it’ll help you feel better, I’ll do it, okay?”

“A-are you sure?” Shauna asked, still nervous, and wanting to give Jackie an out if she needed it.

Jackie nodded, decisive and clear. “Yes, I know you better than anyone, Shauna. Nothing you wanted could scare me.”

Shauna wasn’t so sure about that, but now wasn’t the time to argue about this.

“Um… okay.” Shauna gripped Jackie’s hips. “I’m gonna flip you.”

“You’re gonna—” Jackie’s eyes darkened, pupils growing as she gulped. “Okay.” She nodded, frenetic.

The sight made Shauna feel better about this.

“Do you want me to turn o—”

“No!” Shauna said, voice raising. Jackie’s eyes widened. Shauna swallowed and looked away, cheeks flushing darker. “I want to do it.”

“O-Okay,” Jackie said, nod shaky.

Shauna took a breath and then gripped Jackie’s hips, squeezing them tighter than she usually would, making a small pleased noise release from Jackie’s throat.

She hesitated, and Jackie nodded again. Shauna finally twisted Jackie around with her hands, so she laid on her stomach.

The image brought to mind her own helplessness against the cougar, and she swallowed heavily.

“Okay?” Shauna asked.

“Yeah,” Jackie breathed out, sounding as affected as Shauna.

Shauna straddled her hips, both still in their sleep shirts and shorts, and stared down at her.

“Take your shirt off,” she said, voice strong and clear.

She stared down at Jackie as she awkwardly maneuvered hers off, and then Shauna threw her own off. Neither of them wore a bra to sleep, so when Shauna draped her body against Jackie’s back, Jackie’s soft skin met hers.

They both breathed out at the feeling.

“Um…” Shauna said, head lifting, not sure how to say what she wanted.

Jackie caught Shauna’s eye with the one not squished into the bed. “Just d-do what you want, an-and if I don’t like it, I’ll tell you.”

Shauna’s brow furrowed, hesitant. “Are you sure?”

That sounded like an idea that had many different ways it could go wrong.

Jackie sounded frustrated, as she said, “Yes!”

And it was only then that she realized Jackie’s hips were moving the slightest bit into the mattress.

“Oh.” Shauna gulped, and then did as Jackie asked.

She let her entire body weight drop onto Jackie—the action making both groan.

Her hand came up to Jackie’s chest and squeezed, making her whine. Jackie tried to move her hips again, and Shauna pinned them in place with her own.

“No,” she growled into Jackie’s ear.

The whine Shauna got in return echoed around the room, and Jackie slumped under her—boneless and submissive.

The noise and immediate acceptance made Shauna’s heart race faster. She might turn feral if this kept up.

Her lips moved to Jackie’s neck, and Shauna took a moment to tilt her head and breathe in that sweet scent she couldn’t ever seem to get enough of. Then, using her lips, she made sure there would be marks there tomorrow for everyone to see.

As Shauna continued to roughly squeeze Jackie’s chest with one hand, her other lowered.

She put her hand inside Jackie’s sleep shorts and savored the small gasp released when Shauna’s fingers first touched her.

Shauna moved her hand and then realized how wet Jackie truly was. She was practically dripping. Shauna wouldn’t be surprised if there was a wet spot on the bed after this.

She grunted, left hand tightening on Jackie’s chest at the thought.

Her mouth moved from Jackie’s neck to the meat of her shoulder, not wanting anyone else to see this one.

Shauna swirled her tongue, enjoying the taste of Jackie’s sweat. She lathered the spot with kisses, and at the same time, her fingers ran up and down Jackie’s slit, moistening both in tandem.

Jackie's gasps were getting louder, and usually she'd shyly try to muffle her noises, but with her head turned to the side, she wasn't able to. Any attempts to use her palm to cover her mouth or turn her head had been denied by Shauna.

Most of the people out there were trying to betray Shauna anyway, so they could go fuck themselves. She didn't want to be polite.

And maybe she wanted them all to hear what she could do to Jackie, too.

She deemed her fingers and the spot on Jackie's shoulder plenty wet and ready.

Shauna finally did what she'd always dreamed of when she fantasized about this.

She entered Jackie with two fingers and bit down hard on her shoulder.

The noise Jackie released at that was loud, and if anyone had any doubt about what they were doing, they wouldn't anymore.

The cries she released as Shauna thrust into her and licked up the blood that fell around her were just as booming. She glanced up and could just see Jackie's face from her position.

Her cheeks were bright red, and there were tears leaking from her eyes.

Shauna could see she was trying to say something, so she slowed down.

Jackie gasped out her breath a few times, tears falling faster, and then finally she weakly said, "I-I don't like that th-they can hear."

Her heart leapt into her throat, ice filling her veins from Jackie getting distressed because of something Shauna caused.

Shauna hesitated, brain still not working at full capacity, unsure what to do.

A hoarse whisper went out, "Don't stop."

Her eyes whipped up to Jackie. She looked half out of it, face wet, dazed.

They locked eyes, Jackie's lips releasing little puffs of air. "J-Just cover my mouth," she mumbled.

A moment passed in silence, the room stilling, and Shauna exhaled, telling herself to relax.

Finally, she nodded, steady and sure.

Shauna released her breast and snaked her left hand under her. It made Jackie's head rest on her forearm and allowed Shauna to hold her mouth as she wanted instead.

Shauna leaned forward and kissed her cheek, and whispered, "Sorry."

Guilt filled her, heavier than when she beat a man to death.

She felt part of a kiss on her palm in reply, the other part of the lips hitting a numb point on her hand.

"Okay?" she whispered, and hoped the glassiness of her eyes wasn't obvious.

A longer kiss pressed against her palm, and Shauna hated herself for not being able to fully feel it because of her own actions. If Jackie had just shown her this earlier, that she wouldn't

be able to feel her as well because of the sacrifices, Shauna would've stopped weeks ago.

Jackie's hips tried to move again, the pause taking too long for her, and Shauna shook her head to clear it. She had more important things to do then sit and feel sorry for herself right now.

Her hips trapped Jackie's again, not letting her move, and she put her lips to Jackie's ear to mutter, "Greedy."

Jackie nodded as best as she could with how trapped she was, and Shauna groaned flicking her tongue out against her ear. Jackie drove her crazier than anything in The Wilderness ever could.

She started moving her fingers again and put her mouth on Jackie's shoulder, licking up the blood as she bit her again. The squeal Jackie let out that time was muffled, but no less pretty for it.

Shauna's ring and middle fingers over Jackie's mouth curled, pressing against her lips, and Jackie didn't hesitate to open to them and suck.

She glanced to the side at Jackie's face, blissed out, crying, and drool coming out of her mouth. And Shauna could die in this moment and not have any regrets.

Shauna started grinding against her, using it to press Jackie down to help her and get herself off at the same time.

She pictured the image of them in her mind. Shauna curled around Jackie as close as she could be, arms wrapped around her, pushing her down into the mattress on her belly—not letting Jackie move while Shauna rutted against her like an animal.

Shauna increased her pace, her hand and her hips, and bit down even harder.

Jackie's muffled moan as she came was still pretty loud, even with Shauna's fingers in her mouth.

Her own pace increased, hoping to follow her over the edge.

Teeth clamped around the fingers in Jackie's mouth as she bit her, and a jolt of pleasure went through her at the small amount of pain.

Shauna let out a whine as she finally found her own release.

She clutched Jackie to her tighter as she rode out the feeling, Jackie's tongue languidly rounding her fingers only prolonging the experience.

Until, finally, she slumped onto Jackie's back.

She caught her breath and slowly removed both hands from Jackie.

"Sorry," Shauna said. Softly kissing the wound on Jackie's shoulder. It wouldn't scar. Shauna wouldn't ever bite her that hard, but it'd definitely take some time to heal.

"It's okay. I, um… I don't know if I'd say I like being bitten."

Shauna's head whipped toward her. Jackie still lied beneath her, eyes heavy, lips red. Shauna's stomach dropped—had she made Jackie do something she didn't want to?

Jackie exhaled a soft laugh.

“Relax, Shipman. Let me finish.” She licked her lips, cheeks turning pink. “I really liked how excited you got when you did it, though. You looked like you saw god when you bit me.”

Shauna groaned in embarrassment and draped herself over Jackie back again, this time just to hold her. “Shut up,” she muttered into Jackie’s hair, taking the time to breathe her in again.

They lied there in silence for a few more moments, and then Jackie mumbled, tone curious, “Did it help?”

Shauna’s hands flexed where she’d been holding Jackie’s waist.

She thought about being totally in control over someone else as they were prone and helpless—as they were vulnerable—like Shauna had been.

Except this wasn’t life or death. It was Jackie. Jackie, who had trusted Shauna not to abuse this power over her, even after all Shauna had done.

Knowing she had Jackie’s trust like that was daunting, and there was a high chance Shauna would fuck it up somehow, but it was also soothing and empowering at the same time.

She leaned in, pressing a soft, careful kiss to Jackie’s cheek.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “I think it did.”

## 23. Liar

**Shauna**

*Jackie (reasons are obvious)*

*Mari (surprising. not sure why)*

*Laura Lee (really appreciated that she got the prayer. might be because of Lottie too)*

*Tai (says she's neutral. LIAR)*

**Travis**

*JV girls (is it because he knows all their names??)*

*Misty (not sure. not nice enough? I bit her last week when she startled me)*

*Van (ask Tai if she'd withhold sex as punishment. ask Tai to see if she can find out what I did wrong)*

**Other**

*Lottie (neutral. might change mind considering Laura Lee and Jackie are on my side)*

*Natalie (I don't know.)*

Mari waved at her, and went to wait by the door to go hunt, so Shauna stopped writing.

She walked over to Jackie, sitting with Lottie and Akilah, and put her journal down next to her on the table.

"Can you put that away for me when you're done, please?" Shauna asked, leaning into her chair.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Jackie said, distracted by the shirt she was mending.

Shauna's lips twitched. It was cute how focused Jackie was on the fabric.

"Why does she need to do it?" Akilah asked, brow raised. "She's not here just to serve you, Shauna."

Shauna straightened and scowled. "What?" she asked sharply.

Jackie glanced between them with wide eyes. "Akilah, it's fine," she said, looking at her with a furrowed brow. "I don't mind."

Akilah shook her head and huffed. "Well, maybe you should," she muttered.

Jackie's expression twisted into more bewilderment, and Shauna's jaw clenched.

She really didn't like it when people tried to get in the middle of her business.

Her hand tightened on the chair, and Jackie turned away from Akilah to meet her gaze instead.

She leaned in toward Shauna. “Let me talk to her,” she whispered, a worried frown on her lips.

Shauna glanced from her to where Akilah sat scowling down at her work. She looked up and noticed Shauna’s stare, and her eyes widened, nervousness filling her gaze.

Then Akilah’s jaw clenched, her eyes narrowed, but she wasn’t able to fully hide her tremble.

What the hell was Travis telling them?

Shauna sighed and looked back at Jackie.

She needed to stop this before it got worse—her tiny empire would not crumble because of one annoying boy.

Shauna nodded at Jackie, hopeful she could get answers from Akilah.

She kissed Jackie on the forehead. “I’ll be back later.”

Jackie jolted in her seat, fingers tightening around the fabric. Her eyes widened, as she blurted out, “Did you—”

“I wrote where I was going. It’s in the room by the map.” She smiled at Jackie and backed away. “Don’t worry, so much. I’ll see you later.”

Shauna glanced at Mari, who was practically vibrating by the door, grin in place, spear clutched tightly in hand. She sighed, telling herself this was important.

---

It was the first time she’d been hunting since the cougar attack two weeks ago. She’d have liked to go sooner, but Jackie had been a pain about it.

And worse, every time Shauna was going to ignore her and go anyway, she’d somehow distract her. The other day, Shauna had been studying the map in their room, and Jackie had backed up into her, grabbed Shauna’s hand, and put it into her pants.

It worked, but it was very annoying when Shauna realized what Jackie did.

But she couldn’t afford anymore distractions. Yesterday, Van had questioned her on why Shauna never put in the effort to show respect to The Wilderness during their prayers, and if she could lose *Van*, of all people, then Shauna knew it was serious.

Tai had been nearby when she said it, and even she looked shocked.

So, today Shauna had enough and told Mari they were going out before Jackie could do or say anything.

“Shauna, I’m really happy you’d want to hunt with me,” Mari said, practically skipping.

“Um… yeah.”

“It’s been so much easier to get food now that the cougar is gone.” Mari stopped and turned to her with wide, excited eyes. “And it’s all thanks to The Wilderness and how it protected you so you could kill it for us.”

Mari turned back around and continued ahead, but Shauna had to pause and clench her fists to stave off the boiling rage that filled her chest. Did Mari realize she made it sound like The Wilderness protected Shauna but not Javi?

She swallowed and took a deep breath. A passing thought came to her mind that she’d prefer The Wilderness not to be real if the alternative was it decided Javi wasn’t worth protecting.

“You okay?” Mari asked from ahead, interrupting her thoughts.

Her brow furrowed, looking concerned, staring back at Shauna.

“Yeah, sorry, just uh,” Shauna said, glancing around. ‘The Wilderness was giving me a’— Shauna waved her hand around her head under Mari’s wide-eyed stare— “thing.”

Shauna shook her head at herself, but decided to just push through and get this conversation over with.

“It said some people were angering it. Do you know anything about that?” Shauna walked closer, playing with the spear in her hand.

A bird flew overhead, crying out, and Shauna glanced up at it.

A rustle made her eyes shoot back down, only to see Mari’s back sprinting away.

Shauna blinked, watching her go for a moment in stunned silence.

She sighed, muttering “Seriously?” and then ran after her.

---

It wasn’t hard to track where Mari was going with how loud her footsteps were.

“What are you doing?” Shauna shouted. “I was just gonna ask you if you knew anything about it.”

“They told me this would happen!” Mari leapt over a rock, stumbling when she landed.

Shauna gained some ground with the delay and thought about how she was gonna kick Mari’s ass when she caught her, even if there was a bit of a thrill in chasing another person like this.

“Who told you what?” Shauna asked, rounding the rock so she didn’t trip like Mari did.

“They said you’d blame everyone! And that they could protect me, but I didn’t want to believe it!” Mari sounded like she was crying, and she started stumbling over more things in her path.

“I didn’t even do anything to you! I just wanted to talk to you,” Shauna shouted.

“You looked like you were about to kill me!” Mari’s shoulder caught a tree.

“What?” Shauna pushed off the same tree with her arms like a springboard. She used the momentum to get close enough to leap at Mari and grab her around the waist, tackling her to the ground.

Shauna smirked, satisfaction bubbling inside from finally catching her.

She allowed herself to languish in the feeling for a moment, but she was quickly knocked from her thoughts—reminded of how irritating Mari was.

“Help! Somebody help!” Mari screamed.

Shauna rolled her eyes and straddled her, holding her arms down with her knees. “Mari! I’m not going to kill you!”

Mari kept yelling, and she was giving Shauna a headache.

Shauna slapped her, and Mari panted out in panic, but she stopped shrieking at least.

“Listen to me. I am not trying to kill you.” Shauna leaned down to glare at her and bracketed her head between her arms. “Unless you start fucking screaming again. Then I might change my mind.”

Mari gulped, eyes wide and terrified.

“All I wanted to know was what Travis has been saying. The Wilderness is pissed about it and wants answers.”

Shauna’s jaw clenched, a tiny flare of fear going through her that lying might anger The Wilderness too, but she did her best to shake it away.

She needed to remind herself not to be a gullible idiot.

“Oh…” Mari said, relief filling her face, and distracting Shauna from her thoughts. “So you’re really not going to kill me?”

Shauna sat up, and the sigh she let out felt like it came from the deepest part of her being.

---

Shauna made her way to the meat shed to butcher their catches as Mari slinked off, head down, and avoiding everyone’s eye.

She had to resist the urge to glare at the idiot’s back.

Jackie bounded up to Shauna with wide eyes from where she’d been waiting on the steps outside.

“There you are! I need to speak to you.” She looked jittery, eyes glancing around, foot tapping.

Shauna nodded and gestured for her to follow.

“Did you get Akilah to talk to you?” she asked as they made their way into the shed.

“Yeah.” Jackie nodded slowly, and her expression seemed hesitant.

Shauna put down her bag and raised a brow. “Okay… What’s with the look?”

Jackie froze and then tried to blank her expression. She shifted on her feet, avoiding Shauna's eyes.

Shauna frowned, worry seeping through her with how Jackie was acting.

"Okay, so. I'm gonna tell you what she said, but you have to promise not to get mad." Jackie grabbed Shauna's hands, running her thumbs along the back of them.

Shauna's brow furrowed, her worry deepening. "I'm not promising that."

Jackie groaned, and her hands tightened. "Fine, but at least let me finish first."

"Jackie! Just tell me." Shauna scowled.

"Okay, so uh. What Akilah seems to think is that you're abusing your power to take advantage of people." Jackie paused, hesitating. "Namely… me."

They stared at each other. An oppressive silence blanketing them.

Shauna blinked. And then blinked again.

Her body went numb. No feeling came through as she struggled to process what Jackie had just told her.

"Shauna, did you hear me?" Jackie asked, slow and hesitant.

"Why does she think I would do that?" Shauna muttered, body still feeling frozen as she tried to come through her shock.

"Well, Travis—"

The name triggered Shauna's feelings to flow again. Her heart rate increased rapidly and her teeth gnashed together.

The shock vanished, giving way to pure incandescent rage.

It felt as if fire danced beneath her skin. As if she would explode with this anger and take everyone around her out with it.

Shauna sharply turned and stomped to the door.

"Shauna, wait!" Jackie's arms came up around her waist and pulled, but it was no use as Shauna easily dragged her skinny body along to the door. "Oh, come on!"

Shauna's hand grabbed the door, and images ran through her head—beating Travis to death, tearing his throat out with her teeth, drowning him in the water bucket.

Jackie quickly stepped around Shauna and maneuvered in front of her, putting her hands up.

"Listen to me!" Jackie yelled. "I have an idea, but I need you to stop being insane right now!"

Shauna paused and contemplated just picking her up and moving her.

Her hands reached forward, getting ready to do it, when Jackie leaped forward and hugged her around the waist.

“Please listen. Please!” Her arms squeezed tighter. “I know you’re upset, but at least hear what I have to say before you go barreling in there,” Jackie said, voice quivering.

Shauna took a deep breath, and her shoulders slumped. Her hands rose and stroked down Jackie’s back, trying to calm her down. If it didn’t sound like she was on the brink of tears, Shauna would already be inside, slitting his throat.

Jackie’s body relaxed against her with a relieved sigh. Her head went to Shauna’s shoulder, and she consciously faced away so she wouldn’t breathe on Shauna’s neck.

The sight made Shauna soften more than anything else Jackie could’ve said or done.

“Okay. What’s your idea?” Shauna said, combing her fingers through Jackie’s hair.

Jackie tightened her hold around Shauna’s torso. “Baby, what you have is an image issue.”

Shauna sighed, not liking where this was going but deciding to indulge her. “Okay.”

“Right now, Travis is making you look really bad.”

“Yeah. Apparently he was trying to tell Mari that The Wilderness hates me, and I’m losing its power and going crazy because of it.” Shauna scowled, hating that the accusation almost mirrored her own fears.

Jackie winced and tightened her hold on Shauna. “Yeah, I think that’s what he said to Akilah, except he made it seem more like you’re going crazy and hurting me specifically.”

Shauna’s rage flared up again.

“I really think I could solve this quick if I just went inside and killed him,” Shauna snapped.

Jackie groaned. “And then what? You prove him, right? No one’s gonna listen to you if you do that.”

Shauna stepped out of her arms, massaging her forehead. “Then what the fuck am I supposed to do? I can’t punch him and I can’t lie to him because he’s not gonna believe a word I say. Those are the only things I can think to do in this situation, Jackie.”

Jackie raised a cocky brow and crossed her arms, looking more in her element out there than she ever had before. “Shauna, this is a popularity contest, and you’re losing.”

Shauna gaped at her. “We’re in the fucking forest right now. Why are you talking to me about high school bullshit?”

Jackie released a deep sigh. “Will you please for once in your life, trust I know what I’m talking about.”

Shauna groaned. This was so dumb. She really wished she could just get this over with quickly and then never, ever think about Travis again and pretend he never existed.

Unfortunately, she didn’t have a better idea.

But if Jackie wanted to be involved, Shauna needed to make something clear.

“He has to die, Jackie.” she said, her voice faltering.

Travis was her friend—or at least she thought he was. And Shauna knew Javi's death hurt him, but this? It didn't make sense. Sure, he could be a jerk sometimes, but lying about her—turning everyone against her? She wouldn't have expected that from him.

Jackie's face shifted, her frown deepening as her brows furrowed. Her expression filled with guilt as she looked down.

Shauna let her think, the room staying silent as she did. She wasn't sure what she wanted her answer to be, and there were too many reasons to list why.

Finally, Jackie looked up again. She still looked upset, but she nodded.

"Okay, if he's gotten to where he's making it sound like yo-you're hurting me. Then I get. And I still want to help you."

She nodded, reached out to squeeze Jackie's hand, and then kissed the back of it.

Shauna sighed. "Fine, what should I do? Go pretend to perform some miracles or something so they start believing in me again?"

Jackie shook her head, pursing her lips. "No, we don't have to make you look better. We need him to look so much worse that they don't care how bad you look."

"How are we gonna do that?" Shauna asked, brow furrowed.

Jackie glanced around the shed. "I think I have an idea…"

Shauna looked around, trying to figure out what Jackie was talking about.

## 24. Deer

If their tallying was correct, it should be the beginning of August, and a little over a month since Javi's death. It was hot and sticky outside, but Shauna would still prefer it to what would come in the next few months.

Shauna and Melissa walked into the cabin clearing with the same awkward silence they'd had since they first went out to hunt. Melissa had been unnaturally quiet for someone who usually had trouble not making a terrible joke at inappropriate times. She kept giving Shauna suspicious glances, like Melissa thought she was going to kill her when she wasn't looking.

Which Shauna wouldn't, as it would defeat the entire purpose of going hunting with someone whose loyalty was to Travis. Melissa's jitteriness had got on Shauna's nerves so much, though, she almost reconsidered. They'd finally finished their hunt, and Shauna couldn't wait to end this annoying day.

Shauna hitched up the bag on her shoulder and made her way toward the shed, only to stop and yell, "Why the fuck is the door open?"

Melissa, who was on her way in, paused and looked between Shauna and the door with wide eyes. It sat ajar and was easy to miss if you weren't paying attention.

Shauna stepped toward the shed and then glanced back when she didn't hear any movement. "Grab your spear and get over here. I don't know who the fuck is in there, but I'm not letting anyone steal food."

Melissa jolted and scrambled to Shauna's side, knuckles white with how hard her grip was on her spear.

Shauna turned back to the shed, rolling her eyes. She stomped her way forward, teeth gritted, glare sharp as she studied the entrance. They got to the door that sat inches from being secured in the frame, and Shauna kicked it the rest of the way open.

A gasp went out behind her at the sight they found inside. A deer, or what remained of it, lay in the middle of the shed. Something had torn it apart, leaving it looking as if sharp teeth and claws had done their best to remove the meat from its bones.

She made her fists clench and a scowl grow at the sight. Shauna looked around and saw that the lower hanging food being stored was also gone. She had to admit it was an impressive sight, the view as memorable as she'd hoped.

Shauna glanced at Melissa, and saw her already looking back with wide eyes, trembling increasing when their glances met. She backed up a step, the spear in her hand twisting as she clenched and unclenched her hand.

She growled out, "Move." and shoved past Melissa, stomping toward the cabin. It only took a few moments before she heard scrambling steps following from behind.

Shauna slammed the cabin door open when she arrived. Everyone except her and Melissa were inside. Their heads all whipped toward her at her entrance, and whatever look was on her face made most people in the room gulp.

“Who the *fuck* was the last person in the meat shed?” Shauna shouted, making sure her fury came through in her tone.

There was an awkward silence as everyone looked at her. The long pause made her teeth clench. The answer to her question should’ve been immediate.

“I was. I put the deer inside for when you got back, and then left,” Travis said, lips pursed, arms folded tightly against his chest. He stood near Natalie, who looked at Shauna with furrowed brows.

“Wanna explain why you didn’t think to close the fucking door on your way out?”

Shauna turned and pushed her spear into Melissa’s hand to hold. She made her way toward him, furious stare in place.

Travis huffed out a disbelieving laugh. “What? I closed the door.”

“Really?” Shauna rose a brow, satisfaction running through her. “Melissa, what did we find in the meat shed just now?”

Melissa shuffled forward so she no longer stood in the doorway. Her gaze remained on her shoes. “Uh, well…” she trailed off, staying silent.

Shauna let it go, let the tension build, as she glanced around at the worried eyes locked onto the scene.

“Melissa,” Natalie said, voice sharp and a large frown on her face as she looked between the three of them. “What’d you find?”

“Something ate the deer, and uh I-I think there was food missing from the walls,” Melissa said, eyes still pointed downward.

Everyone started speaking at once, shouting over each other, arguing. Shauna’s gratification grew. She noticed quite a few dirty looks being passed onto Travis, and it ballooned even larger.

“So, what? Now we don’t have anything for dinner because Travis doesn’t know how to close a door?” Jackie asked over the din, glaring at him with her arms crossed.

The yelling got louder at that, quite a few people asking him how he could be so careless. The look on his face was priceless. A wide-eyed, disbelieving stare that swiveled from angry girls to Shauna who couldn’t resist letting a small ghost of a smirk break through.

A loud whistle went out, coming from an exhausted Natalie, whose glance shifted around to catch everyone’s eye. “It was an accident, guys.”

Tai scoffed. “An accident that cost us food. This isn’t just an, ‘oops, let me fix it.’ You, of all people, should know how big a deal this is.”

Natalie let a long breath go out through her nose at that.

“Are we gonna starve?” Mari said shakily, wide eyed and gaping.

“Guys, calm down. I’m sure we’ll be fine for one night,” Lottie said, voice soothing as she stood tall and calm in the storm.

Shauna could almost admire it if it didn’t cut through the panic she was enjoying. She sighed, deciding it was time to move on with this.

“Everyone relax. We still have enough food for tonight.” She nodded, decisive and commanding. ‘This is why I store things higher.’ She scowled. “In case some idiot fucks up our rations.”

Shauna shook her head, glancing at everyone, trying to make herself seem like she had all the answers if only they’d just listen.

“Tomorrow, we’ll go out hunting early and get our stocks full again. Everything will be okay. We’ve got this.” Shauna let out a small breath. She’d been worried she would forget what Jackie told her to say.

Relief swept through the room, almost everyone looking at Shauna like she was their savior, and she would never tease Jackie about her pep talks again.

Travis’ head bowed, his fists clenched and shaking. Natalie put her hand on his shoulder. He didn’t let it sit there for long before jerking away, stomping up to the attic under weighted stares.

Shauna’s eyes traveled from his stiff back to Jackie, and they shared a small smile that looked as loving and normal as their typical ones when meeting eyes.

That had gone even better than Shauna expected.

---

Melissa slinked up to her during breakfast the next morning and apologized for being standoffish. Apparently, she’d had her period for an entire month and it’d made her moody.

Shauna decided not to question it.

---

“Okay. Now what?” Shauna asked, leaning against her table in the shed.

“Same thing he did to you. Rumors.” Jackie shrugged.

Shauna raised a brow, but was much more willing to go along with it after how well the last time went.

---

“I just feel bad for him, y’know with the whole issue he has with The Wilderness.” Shauna sighed, glancing at Mari.

Mari’s eyes widened. “Issue?”

“Well, yeah. Haven’t you ever noticed that Travis has to always hunt with Natalie? It’s because The Wilderness won’t help him alone.” Shauna shook her head sadly and lowered her voice like someone could be around. “Y’know, I think that’s why he’s so… upset with me right now.”

Mari nodded like it all suddenly made sense to her.

---

Van apologized for her digs the next day, saying she didn’t know what she was thinking.

Shauna slapped her on the shoulder and told her not to worry about it.

---

Shauna shrugged, despondent. She looked around at Van, Laura Lee and Melissa, holding onto her every word. “I mean, He says it’s about Javi, but I think we all know it’s because he’s a man who’s not in charge.” Shauna widened her eyes. “You guys remember all that sexist shit he used to say, right? It’s not like someone just changes their whole view on life one day.”

The three girls all scowled, nodding. There were a few stray mumbles about how men are such pigs, and Shauna made sure her nod was very emphatic when she agreed.

---

The next day, Gen, Crystal, and the other two JV girls asked Shauna if The Wilderness would forgive them.

She nodded, slow and deep, and told them The Wilderness forgave anyone Shauna deemed worthy of it.

---

She sat down next to a suspicious Misty who was relaxing on the steps. Shauna glanced over to a sternly glaring Jackie. She sighed and turned back to Misty.

“Sorry I bit you. You startled me, but that was still mean. I hope we can continue being friends.” Shauna reached her hand out.

Misty looked between her palm and her face with wide eyes.

Believing this was a bust, and that Jackie had been full of shit in thinking this would work, Shauna was about to retract her hand when Misty ignored it to launch at her with a hug.

The glare she aimed at a laughing Jackie over Misty’s shoulder was as furious as possible.

---

It’d taken a couple weeks, but with Jackie’s surprisingly apt advice, everything was going back into working order. Almost everyone was back on Shauna’s side. Food was plenty abundant—for now—and Travis had lost the bit of power he’d clawed away from her.

She had to admit, without Jackie, this wouldn't have gone half as fast or easy as it had been. And the thought of that only made some annoyance bubble up instead of the full-blown fury Shauna would've felt about that a year ago.

There was only one last holdout, but Shauna knew they'd figure something out.

"Akilah still hasn't changed her mind," Shauna said, an arm around Jackie as they sat against a tree.

Jackie sighed. "I don't think it's cult related with her, Shipman."

"Then what the hell is it?" Shauna asked, scowling. It's not like she'd ever done anything to the girl.

"She's being a worried friend. Y'know Akilah. She's sweet." Jackie turned so she could look at her. "Of course she's not going to be on your side when she thinks you're hurting me."

She'd forgotten about that. The idea people thought that had pissed her off endlessly, so she'd been thorough in pushing it from her mind.

Shauna sighed. "Any ideas."

Jackie shrugged. "Honestly, I'd rather you didn't manipulate my friend. And I don't think it'd work, so, sorry, baby. You're on your own."

Shauna rolled her eyes. "Big help you are," she muttered, kissing the side of her head as Jackie snuggled into her.

"Doesn't really hit that hard when I've basically been writing your scripts to make you more popular lately, Shipman."

Shauna pinched her side. "Shut up."

Jackie yelped and then glared at her. She pulled Shauna's hair and smirked at the low groan she let out. "Be nice. I'm doing you a favor here."

Shauna scowled and pushed a giggling Jackie to the grass, hoping to shut her up in a way that was more hands on.

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She sighed, looking up like someone up there could help her. When nothing came, she resigned herself to her fate.

Shauna had come up with an idea on how to show Akilah how much she cared for Jackie and didn't want to hurt her, but it was going to be so fucking embarrassing. She didn't like how her gift was part of her power play, but Shauna recognized the need for a necessary evil.

Shauna made her way to Jackie, sitting as usual with Lottie and Akilah. "Uh, hey, Jax."

Jackie looked up at her, brow furrowed.

Shauna hadn't discussed this with her, figuring it'd be better this way. She had been planning on giving this to Jackie at some point anyway, but she would've done it in private, where Jackie could laugh at her and her stupid gift away from other people.

She shuffled her feet, hesitating, and then pulled out something from her pocket and handed it to Jackie, looking away. “Here.”

It was a misshapen wooden figure. The wood was rough in some places, making it necessary to hold it carefully if you didn’t want splinters.

“Oh! Um, thank you, Shauna.” Jackie twisted it around, examining it. The three other girls exchanged looks around Shauna, and she’s not sure what passed, but after a moment Jackie shrugged and asked, “What, uh, what is it?”

Shauna looked down at her feet, scowling, hating the blush she could feel starting on her cheeks. “It’s a cat,” she mumbled.

She’d had trouble picking an animal for Jackie, but she’d finally just decided to make a cat for her because she knew Jackie liked cats and thought they were cute. It was also the only thing Shauna could make that looked semi decent.

“Where did you get it?” Lottie asked, looking at the figure dubiously as Jackie continued to scrutinize it.

“I made it. Javi showed me how to whittle.” She looked away, frown deepening, throat tightening. “He was better at it.”

Her mind jumped to the little wolves he made, and the long walks they would spend together on hunts where he would attempt to teach her and she’d feel inept next to him each time. The memories were bittersweet now.

Jackie’s eyes softened, the hold becoming much more delicate—as if the knowledge made it precious and breakable.

“Thank you, Shauna.” she murmured, still looking it over.

Shauna’s frown dissolved, lips forming into a smile as she stared at Jackie. Her chest heated, affection filling her body. A small noise came out nearby and her eyes shifted to a thoughtful Akilah before looking back at Jackie again. Shauna stroked Jackie’s shoulder with her thumb, always feeling a need to touch her.

Jackie reached over with her left hand as her right examined the cat Shauna carved for her. Her fingers pinched Shauna’s shirt and pulled her closer so her hip was leaning against Jackie’s arm.

“I love it,” Jackie said, looking up at her.

Shauna’s cheeks flushed, and she rubbed the back of the neck. “Uh, cool.”

Jackie rolled her eyes and grabbed the collar of Shauna’s flannel, pulling her down for a kiss.

Shauna glanced up after she parted from Jackie’s lips to see Akilah’s expression had softened, looking between them for a few moments before sighing and going back to her work.

---

Akilah nodded at Shauna the next day before the morning prayer. She even smiled.

---

It was later that day, and Shauna felt like the power she and Jackie had over everyone was thrumming through her. It hadn't even taken a month for Jackie to help her fix this, and even Shauna had to admit she deserved some kind of thank you for all the effort and rumors and lies she'd fed her.

She had to wonder where this came from. Was this how the wilderness changed them? Shauna became a feral animal and Jackie became more ruthless and willing to pick people apart? At least she thought this was a change. Shauna wasn't with Jackie 24/7 at school, but she was pretty sure Jackie was not so Machiavellian.

She wasn't a perfect angel, of course, and she did always seem to *get* people in ways Shauna could never dream of, but usually that knowledge was used to help people or make them feel comfortable.

Shauna wondered if this was how Jackie's more popular friends acted—spreading rumors, knowing just what to say to ruin someone else's day.

Jackie didn't need to try that hard back in Wiskayok to be beloved. But mother nature seemed to be the one thing that could stop Jackie Taylor from getting what she wanted with just a pretty smile, so maybe this was how she learned to adapt.

Shauna shoved Jackie back into the shed wall and followed with her lips. "Y'know, it's kinda hot that you can control people like this," she murmured against her lips.

Jackie pulled back, eyebrow raised, head tilted, looking at Shauna like she'd never believed anything out of her mouth less.

Shauna rolled her eyes. "It is when I'm not the one you're controlling."

Jackie hummed and looked up thoughtfully, something Shauna took advantage of to kiss her neck. The taste of sweat and pure Jackie on her tongue made Shauna tighten the grip she had on her hips.

"More believable, I suppose, Shipman," Jackie said, the words vibrating against Shauna's mouth on her throat.

"What's next?" Shauna muttered as she moved her lips to Jackie's ear.

Jackie pulled her closer by her shoulders. "Everyone's back on your side. Nothing, I guess."

Shauna pulled back, body turning stiff, looking at her closely. "This isn't over yet, Jackie."

Jackie frowned and avoided her eyes. "I mean… are you sure? Travis has just been kinda sulky lately. Can't you leave it alone?"

Shauna sighed, stepping back with a scowl and crossing her arms tight against her chest. She hoped it'd stave off the dread and annoyance building inside. Was she changing her mind? What would she do if Jackie pulled away over this?

Jackie reached forward and stroked Shauna's lip, a small smile on her face. "Are you really pouting right now because I won't help you plan a murder?"

Shauna brushed her hands away, cheeks flushing. "It's not a murder. It's…" she trailed off with an annoyed groan.

Jackie rose a brow. The judgmental look she gave Shauna set her teeth on edge.

Shauna's eyes narrowed at her. "What if he tries again?"

"What if he doesn't?"

Shauna paused, biting at the inside of her lip as she thought.

Jackie stayed silent, letting her think, and Shauna's shoulders relaxed at the patience.

"If I can prove he's not just gonna sit there sulking forever, will you help me?" Shauna asked, hating herself a little for needing to ask Jackie for help, but not able to pretend anymore that she could've done this without her.

Jackie stepped forward and circled her arms around Shauna's neck. "Deal." Her eyes roamed Shauna's face. "Does this mean you need me?" she asked, a grin growing on her face.

Shauna flinched back. A beat passed in silence as she stared at the amusement growing on Jackie's face. Her hands clenched tighter together and her jaw stiffened. An old wound Jackie had been picking at started bleeding, and resentment spilled into her being at the implication that Jackie could have so much control over Shauna that she would *need* her.

Shauna tried pulling away from the arms circling her, and Jackie's smile dropped. Her hands clenched tighter together, not letting Shauna go, and the negative feelings inside spiked. She considered shoving Jackie off her, but even in her rage, Shauna didn't want to get physical with her.

"Get. Off," Shauna growled out.

She wanted to take a walk to cool off, grab her journal and get some of these hateful thoughts out of her head before she spat them at Jackie instead.

Jackie's expression didn't falter, none of the fear Shauna expected—maybe even wanted—to see coming to her face.

"I need you, Shauna, so it'd only be fair if you needed me, too," Jackie said, eyes sharp, expression serious, not an ounce of the amusement she'd had before left on it.

Shauna stared at her, letting the words settle so she could make sure she understood them. When Shauna was sure she heard her right, she stubbornly tried to hold on to her anger, but the weight of Jackie's words and Shauna's inability to stop loving her pushed it away. Her shoulders slumped, expression calming as the heat inside her cooled.

Jackie's fingers played with Shauna's hair. Her eyes were soft, mouth set neutrally, no smirk or scowl in sight.

"You need me?" Shauna asked, voice cracking.

Jackie smiled and leaned forward, but the kiss Shauna was expecting never came as she instead rubbed their noses together.

“Of course I need you, Shauna. You think I’m not planning on following you right into the afterlife when you die?” Jackie asked, breath ghosting across Shauna’s face.

Shauna’s expression gentled. She felt like her body suddenly didn’t have enough room to fit her love for Jackie. So many emotions at once had her bursting at the seams. But this time, the jumble inside made her want to grab Jackie and spin her around until the energy wore off, not punch something until the overwhelming emotions started dissipating.

“I think I’d live and make everyone as miserable as me if you died—to be spiteful,” Shauna said, a small smile twisting onto her lips.

Jackie laughed. “I would expect nothing less from you, baby.” She made Shauna tilt her head down so she could kiss her forehead.

Shauna’s hands found Jackie’s hips, brow furrowing as she played with the fabric. She hesitated, but decided to be honest. “I need you too.”

Jackie’s face softened to a level Shauna’s not sure she’d seen before. Her eyes looking at her with such gentleness and love that even Shauna could recognize it.

Shauna’s face flushed, looking away. “I’m holding you to it. Just so you know.”

“What?”

“If I die, I better see you there soon,” Shauna said, glance shy.

Jackie’s brow rose, staring at her. The only sound inside the shed was their light breathing. Finally, Jackie’s face cleared, a grin growing as she shook her head. “You’re such a selfish asshole,” she said, laughing.

Shauna smirked, not denying the accusation, and leaned forward to kiss a willing Jackie again.

## 25. Mushroom

Shauna needed to prove to Jackie that Travis wouldn't let this go, so she decided to start with the basics. She knew the who, what, when, and how. Now, she needed the why and where.

Why did Travis say those lies specifically? Where did he get them? And most importantly, did he believe them?

She'd considered who to speak to, worked her way down her mental list, and then her actual list in her journal. It wasn't hard to choose. Shauna figured her best bet would be the one girl who had changed loyalties because of a personal issue with Shauna and not from believing in Travis' bullshit.

"Misty, I gotta question for you," Shauna said, pulling her back after morning prayer. "What did Travis say to you when he was trying to get you to follow him?"

Misty's mouth gaped open, her eyes darted around like she was looking for an escape.

Shauna grabbed her shoulder, squeezing a little too hard as she smiled. "I thought we were friends now. Can't you answer a friend's question?"

"Uh um. I-I, well. That, yes. I suppose we are friends." Misty's head bobbed up and down. "And friends do share secrets."

Shauna nodded, trying to tamper down the impatience buzzing through her. "Right. So, what did he say?"

"He said you were a liar, and Javi's death proved it." Shauna's nostrils flared, but she didn't interrupt. "And then he said he'd been communing with the spirits and they were telling him about what you've done." Misty shifted on her feet.

Shauna's brow furrowed. "What does that mean?"

Misty paused and glanced around. They were well away from everyone, but she still lowered her voice. "Not long after what happened, he asked me about the mushrooms I um…" she trailed off, but Shauna could fill in the blank. The mushrooms she poisoned them all with. "I think he's been taking them to speak with The Wilderness spirits," Misty said, rolling her eyes with a slightly mocking tone.

Shauna pulled back and raised a brow at her. She'd need to add a note in her journal Misty was only pretending to believe in this.

"Okay, thanks, Misty." She stepped away, but then paused.

You could call it a thank you, or paying Misty back for this, but either way, Shauna said, "Watch how you talk about shit in the future. People here like to eavesdrop."

Misty's expression relaxed, a relieved grin appearing on her lips. "Right! Thanks, Shauna. I'll keep that in mind."

Shauna rolled her eyes and left Misty on her own. She needed to find those mushrooms.

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Shauna had been worried it'd take longer for her to get a chance, but it looked like she had gotten lucky.

Most people preferred to work outside with how stuffy the cabin could be in this heat. Even with the recently cooler nights, the days still had everyone baking.

It only took a few days for Jackie to mention that with not much to mend, and no one needing help with their chores, she, Akilah, and Lottie were going to the lake—leaving the cabin truly empty

Not long after they left, Shauna used the back door that no one ever seemed to come in through. Her eyes darted to the windows, seeing everyone hard at work, and she told herself to act normal, that anyone who looked inwards would just see her walking toward the pantry —nothing wrong with that.

Everyone had gotten over the dead body thing months ago, so they'd take turns on who got the attic for privacy. Travis had been hogging it for almost a month now, though. At first they'd given him some space after Javi, but it was starting to get on their nerves.

Shauna climbed the ladder, her head popping up and looking around to check if someone was there even though she knew Travis and Natalie had gone out hours ago to hunt. It was empty, so she scrambled the rest of the way up, and made her way to Travis' belongings.

She opened his bag, rolling her eyes at the mess. At least he wouldn't notice if she moved stuff around. Shauna rummaged through Travis' suitcase like a creep, her movements getting less careful the more impatient she became. Then her hand brushed something, a piece of paper that dragged across her fingertips. She paused, the item making her too curious to ignore, and pulled it out with a furrowed brow. Her stomach dropped.

Javi's map.

Shauna unfolded it, gentle, like it would break if she handled it without the lightest touch. Her fingers ran across his messy little scrawls, careful as if they were sacred.

She saw a red-stained corner and had to stop herself from clenching her fist. Her throat tightened, eyes welling with tears. An ache started in her chest.

Shauna exhaled a large breath, and delicately folded it back up, putting it in her pocket. Travis had so much of Javi. She could see the ring he used to always wear, and multiple of his whittled figures. This one would be Shauna's. He worked on it with her when they went hunting, not Travis.

She swallowed and shook her head, reminding herself she couldn't sit here all day. Shauna unzipped a few compartments, searching.

After three, she was about to call it a bust and leave when she finally got to the fourth. Specks of dirt fell out as soon as it opened, and she grimaced but had to believe it'd be unnoticeable. Everything out there had dirt on it.

She reached her hand inside and a triumphant grin came to her lips, opening her palm to the sight of those gross little mushrooms Misty stupidly poisoned them with months ago.

Shauna stood and had to hope this would be enough to convince Jackie.

---

Shauna crossed her arms, watching Jackie as she examined the mushroom.

"What am I looking at here?" Jackie said, twisting them around.

"I found it in Travis' stuff," Shauna said and leaned back against the table.

She didn't know how else to prove to Jackie that Travis had lost it after Javi's death.

"And they are…" Jackie trailed off.

"Those mushrooms that Misty poisoned us all with during that party." Shauna's face heated. Her stomach felt like it swooped around. "The ones that made us, um, go off on our own."

Jackie's eyes widened, and her hand moved away from her like she was about to make Shauna take it back.

She had never asked Jackie about that night. She'd rather not think about the loss of control over herself, and she hadn't considered it before, but now Shauna wondered if Jackie felt the same way.

Jackie bit her lip, staring at the mushroom with a grimace. "I'm not a fan of them, Shauna, but what do I care about what Travis does in his free time?"

Shauna groaned. "Misty said he asked her for the mushrooms to 'commune with The Wilderness spirits.' He believed what he was saying, Jackie. He wasn't just making shit up!"

She could feel herself getting worked up, thinking again about what he said about her and Jackie. If she was being honest, he could've been lying the whole time and not believed it, and she'd still be planning to kill him. Shauna could take a lot, but she would not let someone make others think she'd hurt Jackie like that. Call her vengeful, petty, childish—she didn't care. Jackie was her line, and Travis had crossed it.

Jackie sighed and stared at the mushroom blankly. "So, because he actually believes it, he probably won't let it go."

Shauna exhaled, relief filling her. She'd been worried that Jackie wouldn't understand her point, or wouldn't care.

The noise caused Jackie's stare to move from the mushrooms to Shauna. Jackie's expression softened, her hand reaching up to Shauna's cheek. "He could try to hurt you when he realizes they won't listen to him again…" Jackie muttered.

Shauna leaned into her palm, butterflies filling her stomach. It wasn't often Jackie was so vocal about how protective she could be. She must've looked like a lovesick fool.

"Fine." Jackie shook her head, lowering her arm. "Fine, fine. Okay."

Shauna smiled. “Any ideas? Most of mine are just violently kill him when everyone isn’t looking.” She may have been having some trouble thinking beyond her anger on this.

Jackie rolled her eyes. “Of course they are,” she muttered.

Shauna let Jackie have her bitchy little comments, considering she was the one doing her a favor here. But she planned to keep count and leave just as many marks on Jackie’s neck later.

Jackie looked at the mushroom, and her eyes lit up, but then a frown came to her lips, and she shook her head.

Shauna raised a brow, wondering what all that was about. “What?”

Jackie’s expression soured, squeezing the mushroom tighter. “I have an idea, but I don’t like it.”

“Why?” Shauna frowned and moved toward her.

Jackie’s brow furrowed, eyes still glued to the mushroom. “It seems like a cruel way to kill someone. Maybe I can come up with something else…”

Shauna’s head tilted to the side, her interest piqued. “Tell me, anyway.”

Jackie stared down at the ground, arms wrapping around herself. “And you’re sure there’s nothing else we could do? Travis is your friend.”

She’d been asking herself the same thing for a while, and after some thought, Shauna had convinced herself that she needed to stop this before it spiraled out of control—at least then her reasoning for this would be noble, right?

Shauna sighed, absentmindedly combing her fingers through Jackie’s hair. “I’m not going to let a religious nut job be in charge of the other religious nut jobs. Who knows what shit they’d start doing,” she muttered.

Jackie pursed her lips, but finally nodded, looking back up. She raised the mushroom. “Do you remember how unhinged we got on these things?” Jackie looked away, cheeks bursting with color. “I mean, I almost tore your damn throat out on them.”

Heat burst inside Shauna, and she shifted her feet, but knew it wasn’t the time. Shauna swallowed. “I wasn’t complaining.”

Jackie smirked, but then got back on track. “What if he eats them when he didn’t mean to? Freaks everyone out. Reminds them of Coach Ben.”

Shauna’s brows raised, impressed. She grabbed the mushroom and hummed, considering it. “I think I like the idea of using the mushrooms, but I’m gonna need to twist it a bit.”

Jackie’s head tilted to the side.

“Add more cult stuff.” Shauna shrugged.

Jackie rolled her eyes. “Right, have fun with that.”

Shauna stuffed the mushroom in her pocket and made her way to the door.

Jackie scoffed from behind her. “Excuse me, Shipman. Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Shauna smothered a smile, caught between affection and exasperation. She turned, an exaggerated frown on her face. “What?”

“Don’t play dumb.” Jackie crossed her arms and raised a brow.

Shauna smiled and walked back. She kissed the pout on Jackie’s lips. “Thank you for your help, Jax.”

“That’s more like it,” Jackie said, nodding her head with a stern expression.

Shauna rolled her eyes and flicked Jackie on the ear, ignoring her little yelp to make her way out the door again.

---

Travis waited a week to sneak out in the middle of the night with the few mushrooms left in his bag.

Shauna was lucky she was even up. She only was because she’d had trouble sleeping that night. It was when she’d been blankly staring at the ceiling that she heard the creak of the ladder.

She opened the bedroom door the slightest bit and peaked out through the crack to watch Travis make his way around the girls on the floor and creep outside. Grabbing what she needed for this to work, she followed him after waiting to give him a lead.

She stepped outside and was lucky the night was bright with stars and a full moon, so she had plenty of light to see. Shauna appreciated the stars out here for how useful and luminous they could be. Sometimes she found herself just looking up at them at night and pretending she knew the constellations.

It took a few minutes of following him for Shauna to realize where he was going. The clearing that they used for the party. It made sense—open enough to move around, relatively close, but still not near enough to hear from. Shauna was lucky that it might help her with her plan too. Maybe it’d be like some kind of pattern recognition for Travis.

She stood in the trees and watched Travis sit on the log, breathing slowly.

The only sounds were the bugs and the wind, so she could hear him say, “Please help me before she gets us all killed like she did Javi.”

Shauna’s teeth ground together. Rage and guilt collided inside her, making it feel like boiling acid swirled around. She hated he blamed her—even though she blamed herself too—but he wasn’t even there, and she didn’t need him to validate her feelings.

He raised his hand up with the mushrooms, and Shauna told herself to calm down as he hesitated. She tapped her fingers on her thigh, part of her screaming at him to hurry and the other part telling him to put them down and go back to bed.

He shoved the mushrooms in his mouth.

She sighed, watching as he swallowed them down, and resigned herself to doing what she came out there to. Shauna waited a few minutes, until he got glassy eyed and muttered to himself. Then she moved and grabbed the supplies she’d taken with her.

The antler crown went on her head and the fabric she used to cover her face during the winter covered her mouth. Hopefully, the hallucinations would do the rest.

Any lingering fear that The Wilderness was real—and that she was committing blasphemy—was nothing compared to her need for revenge.

No. Wait.

This wasn't about revenge. It was about stopping Travis before he made everything worse.

She needed to make a statement, she needed them all to listen to her and not have anyone pull some shit like this again—so she and Jackie didn't get hurt, and maybe so some of those other fucking idiots didn't get hurt either.

It was only when she was sure her heart wouldn't beat out of her chest that Shauna finally stepped out of the trees in the costume, the light of the moon against her silhouette helpful in making her entrance dramatic.

She paused, waiting for his gaze to focus on her, making sure not to fidget as her body spitefully craved.

Travis' eyes widened, dropping from the log to his knees. His head bowed, less from deference and more from an inability to hold it up.

Shauna walked toward him, the crunch of grass under her and his panting the only sounds in the clearing. When she got to him she crouched, and grabbed his tear-stained face, wiping away the wetness with her thumb, deciding he deserved gentleness now.

"Do you want to save everyone?" Shauna whispered.

"Yes," he said with a sob.

Her other hand went out and brushed his hair back. She then reached behind her and grabbed her knife.

Shauna brought it forward, and the glint of the blade from the moon's light made it seem so much more holy and important than the hunting knife it typically was. It went close to him, close to his unprotected neck, and he leaned back as if to make it easier for her.

Shauna flipped the blade around and held the hilt out to him. "I want you to take this knife. Walk back to the cabin that's protected you. And draw the symbol of the gods in the dirt."

Her mouth opened to continue, but no sound came out. Guilt, heavy and large, sat in her stomach. Travis' wide eyes stared into her own, and she couldn't keep the contact anymore.

She exhaled, and Shauna's gaze floated to his ear. "And then I want you to raise this knife and slit your own throat right over the symbol you drew."

Travis released a loud breath, and Shauna wiped the tears from his face as they fell faster, her hand lingering.

"Y-You want me t-to—"

"Can you do that for me, Travis? So you can save everyone? So you can see Javi again?" Shauna asked, gripping his cheek tighter.

His shaking stopped, eyes growing wide. “Javi?” He croaked out.

“Yes. Javi.”

His steady hand came up and wavered, pausing before the knife as his muddled mind tried to sort through his thoughts.

He grabbed the knife.

“Okay.”

Shauna stared at him through wet eyes. Her fingers ran through his hair one last time. She leaned forward, the new angle making the tears on his cheeks shine even brighter from the moonlight.

Then Shauna hesitated—wondering if she had the right. But she told herself she might have it more than anyone if it meant giving her first follower a proper goodbye—and kissed Travis’ forehead through the fabric over her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Thank you for protecting us,” he said in return, and Shauna barely stopped herself from sobbing.

She got to her feet and sprinted back to the cabin, not able to be out there any longer. A branch caught her sleeve, and she stumbled. The moon wasn’t as helpful when she had tears blocking her vision.

Finally, she made it back to the cabin, and the sight loosened something in her. She hated it, hated that she thought of this place as home. But it’d been over a year now, and this was still their sanctuary. Shauna made her way closer, and she sighed in relief, going inside through the back door.

No one was awake as she walked to her room and closed the door, leaning against it after she did. She tilted her head back, and looked at a sleeping Jackie, her body relaxing at the sight even if her guilt stayed.

She examined her. The light tan and freckles, her honey blonde hair, sharp jaw and cheeks, and, of course, the big hazel eyes that Shauna loved for how unique they were to Jackie.

Her shoulders slumped, the sight of her alone making Shauna feel better. She stepped forward, putting the stupid pieces of her costume away, then slipped into bed beside Jackie.

Shauna needed Jackie. Needed Jackie to hug her and lie to Shauna about how she’s not a monster.

Jackie didn’t wake when Shauna pulled her close, not when she breathed in her still-sweet scent, not when she whispered that she loved her.

Shauna squeezed her tight, grounding herself in the sound of her strong heartbeat, trying not to think about the blood that would soon soak into the dirt outside.

## 26. Attic

There was a nice breeze that morning as they sat outside for prayer. The mornings and nights had been getting chilly, so Shauna put on a hoodie to join the group.

Laura Lee started the prayer, as usual, and at the end of her speech, she cleared her throat. “Would anyone like to say anything about Travis? I know it was… shocking to find him last week, so I thought it might help to talk about him.” She turned to Shauna, wide-eyed. “As long as that’s okay with you.”

Shauna raised her gaze from the ground and nodded. “Of course.”

There was an anticipatory shift in the group, as if they all were on the edges of their seats to see how someone else interpreted Travis’ death.

Van stood and swallowed with a frown. “Travis was a good guy. And he followed The Wilderness until the very end—”

Natalie sprang up and stormed back inside. The cabin door slamming behind her.

Shauna ignored the outburst, caught Van’s eye, and nodded for her to continue. The idea made her nauseous, but she knew Van was helping make this manipulated suicide seem holy.

“Um, he knew something was coming that would require his sacrifice to protect us. We should all bow our heads to him,” Van said, closing her eyes, the others following suit.

Her eye caught Jackie’s in the window, watching them with a frown.

---

Later, Shauna stopped Jackie as she was on her way out with a group going to gather food.

The others paused, but Shauna waved them off with a stiff smile. “Go on ahead, she’ll catch up.”

Most of the girls left, but Lottie and Akilah lingered behind. Shauna frowned, watching them finally follow the others into the trees. She felt conflicted. On one hand, she didn’t like that their loyalty to Jackie superseded Shauna’s leadership. On the other, she kinda liked the idea of Jackie having people who cared about her—though Shauna hated that Jackie could potentially care about them more than her someday.

“Shauna?” Jackie asked, frown in place. “Did you need something?”

Shauna shook her head, sighing in relief at the interruption to her spiraling thoughts, but then realizing now she’d have to come up with something to say. “Uh, yeah, I just wanted to know… how you were…”

Jackie crossed her arms, raising a brow. “I’m enjoying my time alone in the attic, if that’s what you mean.”

“So, you’re still not coming back to our room?” Shauna said, resisting the urge to pout.

“Nope,” Jackie said, moving to follow the group.

Shauna grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Jackie, I said I was sorry. I don’t know what else you want here.” She scowled.

Jackie yanked her arm out of Shauna’s grip with a glare, stepping closer to hiss at her. “I want to not be involved in manipulating someone to fucking kill themselves for a fake religion, Shauna!”

Shauna groaned, wondering how long Jackie was going to be on this for. “You didn’t even do anything!” Shauna clenched her fists. “I’m the one who came up with it and did it! I’m the one who has to live with what happened, not you! I already feel bad enough about it. Why do you have to make it worse?”

Anything Jackie did would pale in comparison to the pain Shauna brought on herself for how she influenced Travis’ death. It felt like Jackie enjoyed kicking Shauna while she was down with how she was acting. Jackie moved out of their room the day after Travis’ death to stay in the attic, and had barely spoken to Shauna since.

“You should feel bad,” Jackie snapped, making Shauna flinch. Jackie hesitated, and then said, tone much softer, “I told you my idea seemed too cruel, so how did you think I’d feel when I found out you made him slit his own throat?”

Shauna glanced away, eyes moistening. She felt like a monster, and all she’d wanted this whole time was Jackie to hold her and tell her it was okay. Instead she was getting the opposite.

Jackie groaned, putting her head in her hands. “Shauna, don’t cry. You know I can’t deal with it when you cry.”

Shauna stopped trying to hold back the tears and let them fall. Jackie exhaled a long breath and stepped forward, wiping away them away. “You couldn’t have even told me more about it beforehand? You just did it, and I had to wake up as freaked out as everyone else while knowing you caused it!”

Shauna looked away. They’d gone back and forth about this multiple times. Jackie refused to be near Shauna for anything that wasn’t an argument.

Jackie sighed, wiping away more of Shauna’s tears. “Why don’t you go take a break until dinner, baby?”

Shauna’s eyes widened, a small smile coming to her lips. Jackie hadn’t called her anything except ‘Shauna’ since their fight began. “Will you come back to the room tonight?”

Jackie stepped forward and kissed her forehead. “No.”

Her smile faded. “But—” Shauna said, but Jackie ignored her to turn and follow where her group went.

The ache in her chest flared, sharp with pain. She barely resisted stomping the ground like a toddler. She’d thought Jackie would get over this in a day or two, but it’d been a week now. Shauna’s hands shook, a small voice in her head telling her Jackie would never forgive her and she was going to leave her forever.

She forced herself to take a breath, staring up at the sky. Get a grip.

If Jackie wanted to be an asshole, then fine. Fuck her. Shauna didn't care. She had shit to do, anyway.

She kicked a nearby rock with a yell, watching it fly into the woods. Everyone outside turned to look at her. She stomped into the cabin and grabbed her journal and spear, hoping one would help calm her down.

---

Shauna went out by herself, something she'd promised not to do, and she didn't write where she went, something she promised to do. She stomped up and down the woods, and that was most likely why she mainly just wasted hours of her time instead of catching anything. At one point, she retrieved her journal from her pack, taking a break to write instead of continuing to scare away the wildlife.

*One week since Travis died and Jackie is being such a fucking bitch about something she agreed to help me with. And she has the audacity to get mad I didn't tell her what was going to happen when I know she'd have just felt worse about herself. If anything, I did her a favor. She should be THANKING me. God, I hate her! This feels just like back home. I do something Jackie doesn't like, something out of her control, and suddenly I'm nothing to her.*

*She won't hug me, won't kiss me, won't even sleep in the same bed as me. And now I've been sleeping like shit because of her. If I thought Jackie was smarter, I'd assume she did this on purpose. Make me unable to get a full night's rest so I felt even crazier and missed her even more. Well, I said I was sorry. More than once, even. I can only take so much from her. Whatever, I'll be fine. People don't actually need each other, that's stupid.*

*I miss Jackie*

Shauna packed up her journal, feeling a lot better. She stood, her thoughts clearer, her emotions calmer.

A rustling started up in some bushes nearby, and Shauna gripped her spear. She stayed frozen, waiting, trying to be patient. A cream-colored rabbit came hopping out, not having noticed Shauna was there because of her stillness. She didn't even need to throw her spear. She just picked it up and skewered it, killing it instantly.

Shauna lifted it, the rabbit still stuck on the end, and she had the sudden image of taking her spear and bashing the light-haired rabbit against the side of a tree so she'd be able to destroy something viscerally. She imagined herself crushing it with every hit until there was nothing left on the spear, and she and the area became covered in blood and guts.

Her grip on her spear tightened, to the point she heard the wood creak at a weaker point. She stopped, not wanting to break another one. Shauna exhaled a deep breath and told herself she needed to relax and stop thinking about crazy shit.

She shook her head, and dropped the still intact rabbit into her bag, deciding she'd spent enough time out there.

---

It was late by the time Shauna returned, just before dinner. As she entered the clearing, she found Natalie sitting on the porch steps, frowning.

Shauna raised her brow and shrugged, heading for the meat shed. She heard a huff and the sound of footsteps following her inside.

“Seriously, you’re going to pretend I’m not here?” Natalie asked, glaring at her.

Shauna frowned. “Oh, I thought you were just sitting outside.” She ignored Natalie’s eye roll and asked, “What’s up?”

“Where the hell have you been all day? You walked off on your own, didn’t even log where you were going,” Natalie snapped.

Shauna gaped at her. “Are you my mom? What the hell is happening right now?”

Natalie slammed her hand on the table. “Jackie has been freaking out for fucking hours because of you!”

Shauna’s eyes widened. She hesitated, then turned away from Natalie, a faint smile twitching on her lips. She was secretly a little pleased at the proof Jackie still cared. But then she shook her head, reminding herself that would be cruel, and knowing if it was the reverse, she would flip out.

She hoped Jackie didn’t think she’d done it on purpose—Shauna mostly didn’t do it on purpose.

Shauna turned back around, and a scowling Natalie said, “Are you done having your little celebration about successfully worrying everyone?”

She rolled her eyes. A small smile was hardly celebrating. “I wasn’t celebr—wait you were worried?”

Natalie glared at her. She crossed her arms and looked down at the ground, shaking her head. “Travis disappeared in the middle of the fucking night a week ago, and I woke up to his dead body bleeding out on the grass outside. You think I’m not going to be worried when you go off on your own without telling anyone?!” Natalie yelled.

Shauna stumbled back, eyes wide. She had forgotten how much Natalie must be feeling right now. She grimaced, guilt filling her. “I-I didn’t think—”

“No! Of course you didn’t, Shauna. Because you never think about anyone else but yourself.” Natalie shook her head, eyes filled with disdain. She left the shed, slamming the door on her way out.

Shauna put her head in her hands and groaned. “Why am I the emotional punching bag today?”

She wondered how fast Natalie would’ve gotten the rifle if Shauna told her she’d killed Travis because of how much she thought about other people. Probably just enough time for Shauna to regret telling her that.

---

Shauna ate only half her dinner that night, slightly separate from everyone else. She was having a terrible day, and the one person who would make her feel better wouldn't speak to her. Everyone there was lucky she wasn't tearing down the damn walls with how many emotions she had churning inside.

Natalie didn't acknowledge her, and Jackie only glared at her. Shauna was on the brink of a breakdown.

At one point, Tai walked over, frowning in concern—probably needing something—but Shauna couldn't handle it. She just told Tai she'd deal with it tomorrow.

Tai had rolled her eyes, looking exasperated, and Shauna almost tackled her. It felt like everyone wanted a piece of her, and each day, a new part of her got chewed up and spat out.

That night, Shauna went to bed, staring at the ceiling, pretending she wasn't about to sob like a baby. Jackie and Natalie's words echoed in her head, and she felt herself unraveling.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't handle this—leading, being responsible for everyone. Shauna had to admit it to herself. She couldn't do this alone without losing her mind every day. She sat up, wiped away the tears, and hated herself, then hated Jackie even more.

Shauna made her way slowly out the door, checking to see that everyone was asleep. When she climbed the ladder, she cringed at every creak, but was determined.

Her head rose, and she could see Jackie sleeping peacefully on the floor, back turned to the ladder. The sight of her calmed Shauna, just like it had last week. Shauna hated how much power Jackie held over her, but she still wanted her more than anything.

Jackie had told her that she needed Shauna too, which had eased some of the resentment Shauna felt about Jackie's hold over her. But this week had reminded her of one of the reasons why she hated it—Jackie could be gone in an instant. Shauna had told herself that at least Jackie wouldn't leave willingly. But, as usual, Jackie had to prove her wrong.

Shauna crept closer, glaring at Jackie. She felt ready to break at the slightest pressure. Her teeth ground together, fists clenched, as she leaned down. Her heart pounded, and fury heated her body.

She lifted the blanket, hesitated, and hated herself for being weak. Then, with a deep breath, Shauna climbed in beside Jackie, wrapping her arms around her from behind, holding on like she was her teddy bear. She buried her face in Jackie's hair, her tears falling faster at the familiar scent she'd missed.

"What are you doing?" an exasperated voice asked, something Shauna had expected as she wasn't trying to be subtle here.

"I can't fucking sleep without you, Jackie." Shauna muttered into her hair.

Jackie pushed at Shauna's arms until she loosened them, letting Jackie turn toward her. Jackie opened her mouth to speak, but stopped, studying Shauna's face instead.

A moment passed in silence, and then Jackie reached up, brushing away Shauna's tears. She sighed, stroking Shauna's cheek and moving forward to kiss her on the nose. She looked

as tired as Shauna felt, and she wondered if Jackie hadn't been sleeping well either. The thought loosened something inside her.

Jackie tucked some of Shauna's hair behind her ear. "What else can't you do without me?" Jackie asked, lips pursed.

Shauna glared at her, irritated. She'd come there to cuddle Jackie and finally get a good night's rest, not to be made fun of. She hated how reliant she'd become on Jackie's presence to sleep after months of sharing a bed.

"Why?" Shauna scowled, hating that Jackie wanted even *more* power over her.

Jackie's thumb brushed a dark circle under Shauna's eye. "Because I like knowing how I make you happy."

Shauna sighed, hating Jackie a little less.

She paused, pretending to think, even though she already knew the answer. Closing her eyes, she squished half her face into Jackie's pillow. "I can't eat as much."

Jackie ran her fingers through Shauna's hair, scratching her scalp. "We won't always have so much food. You shouldn't waste it," she muttered.

Shauna wanted to roll her eyes at the obvious, but that would require opening them, so she'd have to let it go for once.

"What else?" Jackie whispered.

"I can't—ugh, really Jackie? Do I really have to say it?" Shauna's brow furrowed frustration building.

Jackie's fingers traced her brow, smoothing it out. "Yes."

Shauna groaned. "I can't do this without you. I need you." She rolled over, turning her back to Jackie. "Goddammit. You're so annoying."

Jackie scooted closer, resting her chin between Shauna's neck and shoulder to avoid breathing on her there. Her hand brushed softly against Shauna's stomach. "I know I am, baby, and yet here you are." Jackie's hand moved, rubbing Shauna's stomach slowly. "Want to go back to our real bed? The one any of the others would kill us for?"

Heat rose in Shauna's body, her breath catching at the purposeful strokes. She swallowed, hesitating, then grabbed Jackie's hand and guided it downward. "Or we could christen the attic," she said, her voice shaky.

Jackie let Shauna guide her hand, and then ground it against her until Shauna was releasing breathy moans as she moved her hips. Jackie kissed Shauna's cheek and pulled her hand away. "No. I'm still mad at you."

Jackie stood, grabbed her pillow and blankets, and headed for the ladder, looking back at Shauna with a smirk.

Shauna panted, feeling like she might combust. "Seriously?!"

"Yep. You coming or not, Shipman?" Jackie asked, cheeky grin in place.

Shauna groaned and got up on shaky legs, following Jackie down to *their* bed.

## 27. Dream

Shauna had been having the same dream for days now. Ever since the animals had vanished again with the coming cold, she'd fall asleep curled around Jackie and wake up in a cold sweat.

The dream would always start the same way. She and Jackie close together, normal and happy. Then Shauna would look away, or the lights in her dream would go dark, or she'd blink, and when she saw Jackie again, a bite was taken out of her. It was random where it started. One time Jackie's cheek. Another her neck. Once, half her chest was gone.

Shauna would panic in her dream. Reach forward to clutch Jackie close and see what happened, and then she'd lean even closer and take another bite—swallowing down the meat and skin like a three-star meal.

The better dreams ended there.

The worst ones kept going.

The next part always had Jackie moaning as she clutched Shauna closer, like she wanted to be gnawed down to nothing but bones. Usually, they were alone. But a few of her dreams featured her fellow Yellowjackets standing nearby, licking their lips like they wanted a taste. They'd always try to get closer at one point, and Shauna would growl at them with oozing viscera trapped in her teeth and crimson liquid seeping down her face—like an animal, like a monster.

Shauna would wake up by then, sweaty and panting, slick between her thighs and unconsciously grinding against Jackie in her sleep.

Jackie had slept through it each time, and Shauna always curled away, shame-faced at how fucked up in the head she was.

The dreams happened almost every night now, and that night was no different.

They were outside, sitting against a tree. Jackie had a chunk missing from her leg, and the sight terrified Shauna.

She leaned forward, wanting to give Jackie the comfort her panicked thoughts demanded. But when she got close, she took another bite out of Jackie's neck instead.

It tasted good. Her stomach was empty. And Jackie wouldn't mind—she never did when Shauna took things from her. The 'what's mine is yours' always implicit whenever Jackie got something new.

She ripped her fill away, and usually, this would be when she'd wake up. But in this latest dream, it kept going. She brought a moaning Jackie to the ground, plasma dripping down Jackie's neck into Shauna's mouth. Her hips stuttered into Jackie's eager thigh. She locked her jaw around skin, and took a second bite. Both of them groaned—

A sharp pain from her ribs and a loud yelp made her eyes snap open.

Shauna sat up, panting, gaze darting around wildly.

“What the fuck?” a voice hissed to her right, and Shauna’s head whipped toward it.

In the dim light, she realized it was Jackie. Eyes wide and scared, breathing heavily as she gripped her left shoulder.

Shauna shot toward her. She clasped the hand holding her shoulder, trying to move it and see what was wrong. Jackie didn’t flinch away, but she wouldn’t let Shauna look, making her heart speed up.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Shauna demanded, desperate and quick.

Jackie pushed her hand away, her chest heaving as she stared at her.

Shauna’s expression dropped. It felt like it was suddenly harder to breathe—like the confusion and hurt inside might actually reach up and choke her to death.

Jackie examined her for a few moments in stilted silence, and then she shook her head. Wide eyes narrowed back to normal, breathing slowed, and she softened.

Shauna swallowed, unsure how she’d react to another rejection.

She slowly loomed closer to where Jackie laid on her back, air passing easier through her lungs with every inch Jackie allowed. As soon as she made it above her, Shauna’s gaze darted around her body, hoping she could finally get answers.

Jackie sighed. “You bit me,” she said, breath continuing to slow.

Shauna’s breath hitched, heart beating wildly. She shakily gripped Jackie’s wrist.

“Is it bad? Are you okay? Let me see,” she said, voice frantic.

Jackie stared, silent and thoughtful. The quiet response increased Shauna’s anxiety. Finally, just as Shauna was going to tear Jackie’s hand away herself, her palm lifted. A savage, uncaring tear marred the skin underneath. Nothing like the cautious bites Shauna typically gave her.

Her stomach clenched, arousal and hunger settling inside at the sight. She swallowed hard against her dry throat. A drop of blood dripped down Jackie’s shoulder, and she felt transfixed as her gaze followed it. The taste of copper lingered on her tongue. Nausea rose inside as she had to resist leaning forward for another taste. She wanted to die.

Shauna’s fingers hovered, afraid to touch her. She counted the teeth marks, her stomach sinking with each one. She leaned her head down, slow and trembling. Her insides were in shambles as she waited for Jackie to run away, finally reaching her limit with Shauna. Instead, she silently watched Shauna move lower, lips pursed, but curiosity obvious.

She kept their eyes locked for as long as possible, and then Shauna’s head dropped the rest of the way, lightly pecking her skin—soft, hesitant, useless. Jackie’s breath caught, her hand snapping up to grip Shauna’s arm.

Shauna’s tongue quickly swiped around her lips, and she clenched her jaw to stop herself from groaning at the taste of blood. Her disgust with herself rose, but she exhaled, and did her best to ignore it. She needed to focus on Jackie right now.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, putting their foreheads together. “I had a weird dream.”

“What about?” Jackie asked, frowning as her hand tenderly stroked up and down Shauna’s arm.

Shauna glanced away—as well as she could with the way they both refused to let themselves separate. “Eating,” she mumbled.

“Makes sense,” Jackie said with a small, comforting smile.

Shauna still avoided her eye, and Jackie’s grip moved to Shauna’s waist, pulling her to lie down on top of her.

“It was an accident, Shauna. Don’t worry about it.” Jackie raised her head so their noses tapped together where Shauna still hovered. “I’d probably mistake you for something juicy, too.”

Shauna nodded, trying to smile at the silly joke, but her mind couldn’t move away from how her dream and reality intertwined.

Jackie pulled her the rest of the way down, making Shauna’s head lay on her chest. “Go back to sleep.” Her hands twisted into Shauna’s shirt so she couldn’t escape. “You’re cleaning it and wrapping it tomorrow, though, not Misty.”

Shauna rolled her eyes, but finally relaxed at the soothing vibration of Jackie’s chest as she spoke. “If I have to.”

“You do,” Jackie said, hands squeezing Shauna in tighter, like she thought it would help.

It did.

Their bodies becoming entwined made Shauna feel closer to okay, and the sound of Jackie’s heartbeat lulled her to sleep, but the crushing guilt inside still wouldn’t abate.

---

She was hungry. That was all last night was. Shauna didn’t need to make it any more than that. She swallowed, biting the inside of her lip as she focused on cleaning Jackie’s shoulder.

A finger smoothed out her brow. “Stop that,” Jackie said, and then dropped her hand to Shauna’s thigh where she sat crisscross in front of her.

Shauna rolled her eyes, lips twitching. “Why? Afraid I’ll get wrinkles.”

Jackie’s warm hand squeezed her thigh. “You’re gonna be super hot when you’re old. I can like, sense it.” She waved her hand carelessly. “And you need to let the weird dream go. We all do crazy stuff while sleeping sometimes.”

Shauna made a humming noise in her throat and gently secured the makeshift bandage on Jackie’s shoulder. She then lowered her palm and placed it on top of Jackie’s hand—still lying on her thigh—and stroked the side of it with her thumb. “What sort of stuff have you done in your sleep, Jax?”

Face flushing cherry red, Jackie avoided her eyes. “That’s not important.”

Shauna leaned forward, suddenly much more interested in what Jackie was talking about. “Oh? But it shouldn’t matter, right? I mean, you were asleep.” Her lips lifted into a smile, some of her melancholy already washing away without Jackie having to try.

Jackie huffed and lightly shoved her away. “Shut up.”

Shauna grinned. “C’mon, you woke up to me being a zombie. It can’t be worse than that.”

Jackie tilted her head, a smirk on her lips. “A zombie trying to hump me—if we’re being specific.”

Her face burned, and she had to resist running away. She’d been hoping Jackie hadn’t noticed. Shauna shook her head, swallowing. She considered pushing for an answer, but she knew Jackie would only do the same in return, always persistent over the dumbest things. “Fine. Whatever.”

Jackie grinned, a wide, silly, lovely grin, and the sight of Jackie so happy, even after last night, made her forget the flicker of irritation over not getting an answer.

There was a knock at the door, but before either of them could answer, Misty barged in. She smiled at them both, walking closer. Shauna glared, on the brink of snarling at her for interrupting them.

Sighing, Jackie shook her head. “Misty, knocking doesn’t count if you don’t wait for an answer,” she said, tone kind.

Shauna had no idea how Jackie could still be patient with Misty after all their time out there. Jackie did have the tendency to treat the team like a pack of unruly kindergartners when she was captain. She would make a good elementary school teacher. Shauna pictured Jackie in a skimpy teacher outfit—one that would get her fired immediately.

“Shauna, are you listening?” Jackie asked, nudging her.

Shauna swallowed down the saliva in her mouth and lightly shook her head, hoping her cheeks weren’t as red as they felt. “Um, yeah, I-I was listening.”

Jackie’s brow rose, eyeing her skeptically, and turned back to Misty.

Misty cocked her head, looking between them. Her eyes zeroed in on Jackie’s shoulder, uncovered by her tank top.

Shauna jumped up, not liking the scrutiny. What happened wasn’t any of Misty’s damn business, and she didn’t need to be eyeing Jackie, anyway.

She glared, crossing her arms. “What do you want, Misty?” she snapped.

Misty stumbled back. She gulped, but then her brows furrowed, eyes locking in on a point of Shauna’s face. The examination made her want to clean her skin with bleach if only Misty would leave her alone. Misty’s mouth opened, but then she stopped herself and pursed her lips.

Shauna took a step forward, in no mood for whatever weird shit she was doing right now, and Jackie quickly stood up beside her, a hand on her wrist.

“Misty, just tell us what you want. We have to work soon,” Jackie said quickly.

Misty glanced at Jackie's shoulder one more time. "When you go out, can you get me some flowers?" Misty asked. Shauna opened her mouth, about to ask her if she looked like a florist, when Misty hastily continued, "For medicine! They're flowers for medicinal purposes, not for decoration!"

Shauna scowled. Why did Misty suddenly need flowers? Was someone sick, and she didn't know? Glancing to her right, Jackie looked as confused as she did. So at least it wasn't just Shauna in the dark here.

"Why?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

Misty sputtered for a moment, body trembling. "I-I just thought, with the uh snow coming soon, it'd be good to be prepared in case anyone got sick." Her head bobbed up and down.

Shauna looked at Jackie, wanting to know what she thought, but she didn't seem to have any more insight than a small shrug. She sighed and turned back to Misty. "Fine, write what it looks like and where it can be found."

She supposed preparing in case someone got sick wouldn't be the worst idea. They were lucky no one did last time, especially with how closely packed in they all were. One person gets ill, they'd all probably get it too.

Misty's gaze lingered on Shauna for another moment. She glared, heat prickling under her skin, feeling judged.

Jackie's grip moved to her hand, fingers tightening in a soft squeeze. It was the only reason she didn't shove Misty outside.

Misty hesitated, then did an awkward little wave before finally turning to go. Shauna's eyes stayed on her back until the door closed behind her.

Shauna huffed and turned to Jackie. "Do I have something on my face?" she asked, absentmindedly squeezing her hand.

Jackie blinked, glancing at Shauna. She hummed to herself. Then she licked her thumb, making Shauna raise a brow, but she decided to just endure it as Jackie wiped her cheek. Her hand came up to show Shauna what it was, and she couldn't help the twisting in her gut as she realized what Misty kept looking at.

Blood.

---

Shauna and Van went outside together later that day. Van had taken over Javi's spot as Shauna's hunting partner. She'd been the one to ask Shauna about it, tired of being so cooped up. It had caused a huge argument between Van and Tai that everyone had made themselves scarce for. They didn't talk for at least a week afterward, but they seemed fine now, as far as Shauna could tell.

Van had been helpful when there was more small game to find, but now with how scarce it'd gotten, they mostly just spent their days wandering and hanging out—glad for a break from so many people. Shauna and Van had been friendly beforehand, and they'd become closer over the weeks as a byproduct of proximity, if nothing else, but Van would never

replace Javi. She couldn't bring herself to care as much about her as she did him. Not to say she disliked Van, but Shauna didn't think she'd go catatonic if she died.

"So, Misty wants us to get flowers?" Van asked, reading through the description with a frown.

Shauna shrugged. "She said the roots or seeds or something. I don't know. I mostly just wanted her to go away."

Van nodded. "Oh, yeah, okay. That makes sense. Where to then, oh great prophet?"

"Shut up." Shauna rolled her eyes, but couldn't keep a slight smile off her lips.

Shauna pulled out a second piece of paper she begrudgingly took that contained Misty's long-winded directions. "Damp, shaded. Try near rivers or streams. It'll probably look dead, but still kinda purple. Uh, be careful when handling it. It can give you hives." She frowned and reread the last part again.

"Ew." Van said, nose scrunching up. "You're getting it, not me."

Shauna glared. "I thought I was the 'oh great prophet.' What the hell changed?"

"I need these babies for Tai," Van smirked, fingers wiggling in the air.

"Well, I need mine for Jackie!" Shauna sputtered, a blush staining her skin.

Van rose a brow, head cocking to the side. "Really? I always thought she was the one who…" she trailed off.

Shauna ripped the paper from Van's hands and stomped off. "We take turns!"

"I mean so do me and Tai, but Jackie always seemed like the type who wasn't giving up that control unless someone made her." Van paused, and then caught up to Shauna's quick footsteps with a smirk. "Damn, Shauna. I didn't know you had it in you."

She knew they definitely heard the time a few months back Jackie had gotten very loud before Shauna covered her mouth. Most of them hadn't been able to look either of them in the eye for hours afterward, but she was only now realizing that they obviously wouldn't be able to tell who it was that had been moaning uncontrollably.

"You all thought that was me?" Shauna said, glaring. The paper crumpled in her clenching fist. She knew in the end it didn't matter, but it was still pretty irritating that everyone assumed Shauna couldn't make Jackie lose her mind, too.

She should let someone catch them in the act so they'd stop thinking of her as Jackie's plaything.

The thought came out of nowhere, half-formed and stupid, but Shauna latched onto it, anyway. She liked the idea that everyone would stop assuming she was beneath Jackie—literally, in this case—but then her teeth gritted together, her chest tight with something raw and possessive. The realization hit her hard: that would mean other people would get to see Jackie like that. Her blood boiled at the thought of anyone else seeing Jackie so exposed. No one else had that right except Shauna. Now she wanted to stomp back to camp and kill everyone, just in case anyone had ever thought about Jackie in that way.

Maybe she could convince Jackie to tell Lottie and Akilah more about their sex life, and make sure they knew Shauna wasn't just sitting there doing whatever Jackie told her to.

Wait. No. That irritated her, too. Everyone just needed to mind their own damn business.

"Shauna!" Van yelled from a few feet away with a scowl.

She shook her head, so lost in thought that she had no clue how far they'd walked.

"Are you done thinking up elaborate ways to kill us all and use our skin as blankets to keep you and Jackie warm?" Van asked, rolling her eyes.

"Good idea. I'll keep it in mind." Shauna crossed her arms, scowling into the distance.

"I'll bet," Van said, and then gestured over her shoulder. "Creek's this way. Y'know, just in case you weren't paying attention."

"I know where we are," Shauna snapped, and stomped off in the direction Van pointed.

She didn't get far before Van called out behind her, laughter in her voice, "Wait a minute! I meant the other way. My bad."

Shauna's fist clenched tighter, making her way back again. The paper in her hand would become unreadable if she wasn't careful. "I'm telling Tai you were bullying me."

Van rolled her eyes. "Tai would not care."

Shauna stopped at her side and smirked. "Wanna test it? I'll throw in some stuff about you making fun of me for not wanting to come out when I get home. Then we'll see whose side she's on."

Van blanched, flinching away. "Damn, were you always this evil?"

Shauna's smirk grew, a satisfied buzz swirling around in her chest.

Van huffed, shaking her head. "I'd say don't let it get to your head, but I can see it's already too late." She gestured in a third direction. "C'mon, it's *actually* this way. Let's get Misty her stupid flowers."

Shauna followed along, smile still in place.

## 28. Marple

Shauna walked into the populated cabin and examined her hands for the fifth time.

“I’m telling you there’s nothing there,” Van said, peering over Shauna’s shoulder.

Throwing her arms back down to her sides, Shauna snapped, “I know.”

“Then stop looking at them.” Van rolled her eyes and made her way to an anxious Tai across the room under the heat of Shauna’s glare.

Shauna shook her head, missing when she had a hunting partner that respected her too much to talk shit.

Strolling up to Misty, she raised the bag with an unimpressed stare. “Why didn’t you tell me this stuff had a chance of giving me hives?”

Misty’s eyes widened, glancing around furtively. “I read out the instructions as I wrote them.”

Shauna hummed, knowing she hadn’t been listening. She raised the bag to shuffle through it. “Right, so, where do you want th—”

Misty released a squeak, launching herself forward and snatching the bag from Shauna.

Shauna leaned back in surprise. The cabin quieted, the jovial mood fading as everyone stared at Misty.

Eyes darting around, Misty grabbed Shauna’s sleeve and tried to pull her toward the door. A glare cut across Shauna’s face as she yanked her arm away.

“What are you doing?” she spat, looking down at Misty’s mousy frame with as much irritation as possible.

Did people think it was okay to start dragging Shauna around now? Only Jackie was allowed to do that.

Actually, no. Jackie wasn’t allowed to do that either. Obviously. That was a stupid thought to have.

Misty stepped closer, shooting her a wide, pleading glance. “Shauna, um, these need to be stored uh outside!” Her face lit up, and she continued, “In the meat shed! I’ll show you.”

The words made her scowl, not wanting to go hang out anywhere alone with Misty fucking Quigley.

Misty’s lips twisted into a wide fake smile, so large her lips were twitching, and Shauna changed her mind, deciding to agree if it would make her stop doing whatever the hell that was.

A long breath was exhaled through her nose, her patience very thin. “Fine.”

She walked to the door, the chatter of the cabin coming back as they all realized it was just Misty being annoying and loud, as usual.

Making her way to the shed, Shauna blew on her hands as the chill from the night really started to settle in.

Why did the stupid plant need to be stored in her shed, anyway? The thought of her space being invaded by Misty's nonsense made her hackles raise. It was like other people or things touching something that was *Shauna's*, dirtied it somehow. Misty better not bother her for months after this.

After stepping inside, Shauna threw the bag onto the table with a frown, crossing her arms. "Fine, where do I have to put it?"

Misty gaze darted back toward the cabin, and then she closed the door behind her under Shauna's growing frown.

The weirder Misty acted, the less Shauna wanted anything to do with her. Maybe she could pawn her off on someone else.

Her lips twitched into a mean smile, thinking about pointing Misty in Natalie's direction so she'd have to deal with her instead.

Misty grabbed the bag and folded the fabric down so she could see the plants inside. "Yep, that looks right." She paused, adjusting her glasses and leaning closer. "At least I think it's right."

Shauna blew out a long breath, impatiently tapping her fingers on her work table. "Is it the right thing or not? I don't have all day."

Misty's head shot up, grin slotting itself into place. "Yeah! I think so!"

"Great," Shauna said blandly. "Now what?"

Covering the plants again, Misty slowly turned to her with a furrowed brow. "Okay, so, uh. There's something I need to tell you…" she trailed off, staring down at her shuffling feet.

Straightening, a scowl etched itself into Shauna's face as she prowled forward. "Tell me what?" she asked, tone sharp.

"Um, well. I may have uh lied about wh—"

Shauna shot forward, and Misty let out a loud yelp as she stumbled back into the wall. "You what?" Shauna snarled, her fist clenching.

She was going to wring Misty's fucking neck if she tells her she needed these to give to her crush.

"It was to help you! I didn't know who could be listening! An-And I wasn't sure if you'd want Jackie to know," Misty said, trembling under Shauna's rising fury.

She contemplated stabbing her and being done with this, but unfortunately, her curiosity won out. "What the hell is it, Misty?" Shauna closed the gap between them further, teeth clenching.

“Aconite!” Misty yelled, leaning against the wall, panting.

The word made her pause, her brow carving into a furrow. “Aconite?”

“Yeah it’s a—”

“I know what aconite is.” Shauna rolled her eyes. A little offended, she thought otherwise. “I’ve read Agatha Christie before. Why the fuck did you ask me to go get you poison?”

Grinning, Misty said, “I’ve noticed lately the burden of leadership seems to be getting to you.”

Shauna scowled, not wanting to hear what Misty thought she knew about her feelings. “Get to the point.”

“Uh! Right! We’re starving, and I know we’ve all been thinking about it!” Misty scrambled to say.

A tilt of her head was the only reply she gave, not having any idea what Misty was getting at anymore.

“An-And I know you bit Jackie, so I-I thought—”

Shauna slammed her into the wall, pinning her as she raised her knife. “This is not getting to the fucking point, Misty. You get one more try, and then I’m stabbing you and cooking you for dinner!”

Misty shook harder. Her terrified gaze darted to the blade. “Yes, exactly! We need food. We can use the aconite and say the person got sick!” she said, so quickly her words stuck together.

The knife eased as Shauna’s thoughts scrambled, trying to work out what Misty was saying.

Misty wanted to start killing people, and then… well, and then eat them. They’d done it before. But did that make it right?

Shauna’s teeth gritted. Does it even fucking matter anymore what was right or wrong? They were all going to hell. She was headed for the deepest, darkest pit imaginable. The least she could do was buy them all some more time before they got there.

She needed to think of more important things right now, like how any of this would work.

Her mind flicked to the novels she’d read that used aconite. Usually they’d just keel over and die dramatically mid sentence for maximum effect. Shauna assumed the real symptoms weren’t so quick and easy.

Lips pursing, she examined a terrified Misty for a few more seconds. Shauna sighed and stepped back.

Her gaze drifted to the wall next to Misty as she asked, “How long will it take and what will it do?”

She got stuck on what would come afterwards. The fullness in her belly. The taste of cooked meat hard won by her own effort—be it hunting or otherwise.

Shauna's heart pounded. Her mouth watered, and she swallowed against a dry throat—unsure if it was because of a hunger for food or for what the food would be.

"There are a ton of symptoms," Misty said excitedly. "There will be the usual flu like ones: vomiting, diarrhea, sweating, weakness. But along with that, there's even more: convulsions, paralysis, change in heart rate—"

"Okay! I get it," Shauna interrupted, nausea curling in her gut. "How long?"

Misty adjusted her glasses, looking up in thought. "It will depend on the dose, I suppose. If we give them a lot, it could be quicker. That way, they wouldn't have to suffer either."

Clenching her jaw, Shauna avoided Misty's stare as an idea came to mind. She hesitated, not sure if she wanted to voice it, but a glance at the depleted food stores reminded her she was the one in charge who needed to handle this. She knew this would be delicate. They all needed to think it was The Wilderness who chose, especially with how much the others clung to the supposed meaning behind Travis' death. Along with that, the sacrifice Shauna gave when she was forced to butcher their food for them should remind them of her own burdens she shouldered for them.

She needed to be sure their plan achieved all of this, and Misty's was close, but not enough. Anyone could get sick, but not everyone could get chosen.

Shauna sighed out a breath, telling herself it was all necessary if it meant survival under her leadership.

"Could someone survive it?" she asked, still avoiding Misty's eye.

Misty cocked her head to the side. Curious eyes roaming Shauna's face. "Yes, if they're lucky."

Luck. Maybe that's what The Wilderness choosing you meant. That you just happened to get a bad hand.

"In a week from today, if we don't find food." Shauna turned her dead stare to Misty, who gulped when their gazes met. "Give a small dose to Gen, and a small dose to Robin. The Wilderness will choose who dies."

Ignoring Misty's gaping visage, Shauna walked to the door to leave.

"W-Wait. But if we do a low dose, th-they'll be in agony for hours. One large one woul—"

She didn't turn as she interrupted her, "The Wilderness will choose who dies."

It wouldn't be her. It would be bad luck. Just bad luck.

Her body didn't move from in front of the door. She could hear Misty's slightly heavier breathing, and shuffling feet behind her, but other than that, the shed was silent.

Finally, in a shaking voice, Misty said, "O-Okay. One week."

Shauna nodded and left the shed without a backwards glance.

---

It was later that night and after their meager scraps of dinner that Shauna found herself alone with Jackie in their room. Jackie's eyes followed her thoughtfully, and Shauna pretended she couldn't feel the burning gaze on her skin.

"What did Misty want earlier?" Jackie asked, not breaking her stare.

Shauna froze in the middle of taking off her boot, mind racing as she tried to decide what she should tell her. She looked up and met Jackie's soft and concerned gaze—none of the judgement Shauna always expected to be there.

If this was still before the crash, senior year Jackie and Shauna, she knew she probably would've read the look on Jackie's face wrong. Maybe on purpose, maybe on accident. Shauna never could be sure which it was, even after the fact.

Now, though, they'd been together for months, and Shauna had seen Jackie's face change into expressions she'd have never even dreamed of seeing. She could read Jackie better than any animal she had to figure out the best way to butcher.

Ignoring her untied shoe, she walked up to Jackie sitting on the edge of their bed. Under her curious stare, Shauna stood in the cradle of her thighs and sighed.

"Okay…" Jackie said, raising a brow at her.

Shauna hesitated, wondering if maybe it'd be better to just lie and move on. It'd certainly make it easier now.

She remembered the last time she lied about something like this to Jackie. Going up to the attic to cuddle her because of how badly she missed her and needed her to sleep.

The dreaded word: need. It circled around in her head. She was of a mind to fight against the chain she imagined around her neck—too stubborn to give up until she either broke it or choked herself to death.

Warm hands came up to capture her own and play with her fingers. She watched for a few moments, enjoying the soft, playful gesture for what it was. Her resentful thoughts melted away under Jackie's touch, and Shauna stopped stalling.

"Misty told me she lied this morning. She asked me to get poison flowers, not medicinal ones. She said we should use it to poison someone so we can stop starving." Shauna stared down at Jackie, not wanting to avoid her gaze like she did Misty's.

The hands surrounding hers froze as Jackie stared at her with wide eyes.

Shauna shrugged, a small smile coming to her lips. "You wanted me to be more honest."

Rolling her eyes, Jackie's fingers started moving again. Her legs wrapped around Shauna's, making her step closer. "You had to tell me all at once like that?"

"I knew you'd interrupt me if I didn't."

"Asshole," Jackie muttered.

Jackie paused, a furrow in her brow as she stared into space, thinking. Shauna raised a hand from hers to smooth out Jackie's hair, letting her think in peace.

What would she do if Jackie tried to argue with her? Or demanded she didn't do it. Would Jackie try to take control or rat her and Misty out?

She continued to run her fingers through Jackie's hair—not as bothered as she expected by Jackie potentially betraying her. If she somehow lost Shauna her power, she supposed she would just have to carry Jackie off to go live by themselves instead. Then she would spend the rest of her days never letting Jackie forget how much of an annoying brat she was.

Jackie's jaw clenched, a frown carving itself onto her face. "Will it hurt?" she asked, voice low and tight, like she didn't really want to know the answer.

She'd like to lie about that, but unfortunately, Jackie will see them as they experience the aconite. "Yes."

"So you're just going to slip them some poison. And then what? Act like they were sick?" Jackie snapped, making Shauna flinch.

Jackie paused, studying her face. A few moments passed, the only sound being the wind hitting the outside of the cabin.

Finally Jackie sighed, glancing away. "Maybe you can think of something else," she said in a softer tone.

Shauna stayed silent, trying to think. Her fingers continued their ministrations with Jackie's hair, finding the soft strands soothing to play with. Going by the small pleased sigh Jackie released, she seemed to agree.

Again, she decided she would just be honest, though she wasn't sure why. Was it that she didn't want to hurt Jackie's feelings, or be apart from her for so long again?

She internally rolled her eyes at herself. What stupid reasons to be honest with others. She was probably just too tired to come up with a better story, is all.

"I told Misty to give two people a low dose. Luckiest one wins." Her stare didn't break from Jackie's.

Jackie's shoulders slumped. The look she gave Shauna was indecipherable. All she could parse was some type of sadness.

She glanced away, a small sigh releasing. "Who?"

"Gen and Robin," Shauna said, eyes lazering on the side of Jackie's face.

Jackie's head whipped back, an angry furrow in her brow. "Why?" Shauna's head cocked to the side, so she continued, "Why them, Shauna? What did they do to deserve it?"

"Same thing we all did to get into the plane crash in the first place." Shauna shrugged. "Nothing."

Jackie looked down, biting her lip. The grip she still had on Shauna's hand tightened. Shauna did her best to squeeze back in return, even with the awkward hold Jackie had on her.

She glanced back up at Shauna, eyes teary, jaw clenched so tight her neck was strained. "I fucking hate it here," Jackie spat, voice filled with frustration.

Shauna nodded, sighing. She did one last pass of her fingers through her hair. Jackie's shoulders slumped, swallowing. Her palm came up to rub at her teary eyes, and Shauna let her be.

Jackie softly squeezed Shauna's hand one more time, a deep part of her soothed by the small action. Then Jackie nodded, not saying anything else.

Turning away to get ready for bed, she gave Jackie a few minutes to herself.

When she finally slipped under the covers, she turned her back to Jackie. "Can you hold me?" Shauna whispered.

The sheets ruffled behind her as Jackie shifted to look at her. "I—are you sure? I know your neck still bothers you, baby. I don't want to make you uncomfortable…" she trailed off.

"Please," Shauna whispered, tone sounding more desperate than she would've liked.

She could hear Jackie moving around again, much more quickly this time, going by the sound of it.

It only took a few seconds more for Jackie's arm to fly around her and clutch her close into her warm, familiar chest. Shauna hadn't been held like this in months.

The heart behind her was beating like a scared rabbit.

A small huff of laughter released from Shauna's throat. "You alright back there?"

Jackie nodded, forehead rolling along her spine. "Yeah, sorry. I just…" She pressed Shauna in closer to her, inching forward even more, voice vibrating into her back. 'I missed holding you.' Shauna's breath hitched. "And you sounded like you could use it, too."

Shauna nodded and grabbed the hand on her stomach to give a soft squeeze. "I did. Thank you."

"Thank you for being honest," Jackie whispered. "I know it went against your every instinct."

Shauna snorted. "Shut up and go to sleep."

Jackie hummed, the sounded rumbling through them both. Her soft breaths filled the room not long later.

Shauna stared at the wall, thinking again about what she planned on letting The Wilderness do. Doubts filled her mind, wondering if maybe Jackie had a point in asking if there was another way.

The hand on her stomach moved down in Jackie's sleep. Shauna grabbed it, smiling at where her unconscious mind might be going. Her thumb rubbed the soft skin and even enjoyed the rougher calluses Jackie had earned from sewing.

Then a frown formed on her lips as she noticed how thin Jackie was getting again, how much of the sharp bone Shauna could feel beneath the skin of her fingers.

Her teeth clenched, cold resolve and fortitude making its way to every point of her being.

She brought Jackie’s hand carefully to her lips and ignored Jackie’s sleepy mumble behind her to kiss her smooth palm.

One week.

## 29. Listen

It was five days from when she'd spoken to Misty about the aconite, and Shauna was standing out front of the cabin, glancing around and scribbling in her journal. Nothing too important or personal, just a list of things that needed to get done before the snow came.

That was why she didn't complain about Jackie being especially clingy that morning—clutching Shauna from behind, her chin resting on Shauna's shoulder as she peeked at what she was writing.

The heat from her body was also a welcome contrast to the chill in the air.

There was a repetitive thump coming from Tai chopping wood nearby that accompanied Jackie's soft, soothing humming in her ear, and it was an oddly relaxing combination.

"Someone should probably sharpen the axes soon," Jackie cut herself off to mutter in Shauna's ear, warm breath coasting along her skin.

Shauna hummed at the words, jotting them down in her journal. Jackie wiggled in place, squeezing her tighter, her smile buried in Shauna's shoulder.

She absentmindedly turned to give Jackie a kiss on the forehead, and ignored the fingers starting to fiddle with her shirt, knowing she needed to finish this soon.

"Shauna, we have a problem!" Misty hissed, scrambling up to them.

She closed her eyes, annoyance thrumming through her. Shauna knew whatever peace she'd been enjoying with Jackie was about to come to an end.

Stroking Shauna's stomach with her thumb, Jackie whispered, "Be nice."

"What, Misty?" Shauna asked, forcing her tone to be kind.

Misty reached out to try to grab her sleeve, but that was stopped quickly by a hand pushing hers away. Surprisingly, though, it wasn't Shauna this time.

She looked over her shoulder at Jackie, glaring at Misty. "Stop trying to touch her. You know she doesn't like it," she said, gripping Shauna even tighter.

Misty's eyes widened, her hands waving around frantically. "No, sorry! It's not like that, Jackie. I know she's like completely yours. I would never try to come between you two!"

Jackie's mouth gaped open, arms loosening. "Uh…" She glanced at Shauna.

Lips turning up into a grin, Shauna shrugged in reply. Happy to let Jackie take the lead for once.

Jackie rolled her eyes, turning back to Misty. "I know you aren't trying to…" She let out an exasperated breath. "Misty, I'm just saying you need to respect Shauna's boundaries and stop touching her."

Putting her hands behind her back and shifting from side to side, Misty said, “Right, of course! No problem, Shauna. I need to speak to you. It’s important.”

Jackie hid her lips in Shauna’s hair to whisper, “See what happens when you use your words instead of threatening people, Shipman?”

Her elbow nudged Jackie in the side, making her shift back with a smirk.

Misty tapped her fingers on her thighs, gaze darting between them impatiently.

Rolling her eyes, Shauna asked, “Fine. What?”

Misty gestured to the shed. “It’s about the storage, um, I think there’s something, uh, wrong.”

Sighing, she squeezed Jackie’s arms, and stepped out of her embrace to walk over, Misty following along behind her. She didn’t make it far before Jackie followed too, grabbing Shauna’s hand with a brow raised, daring her to object.

Great, now Jackie was coming along to the meeting about poisoning people. Fantastic.

Shauna opened the shed door and let them all in, putting her journal down on the table for later.

Misty glanced between them, brows furrowing. She opened and closed her mouth. The floundering had Shauna biting back a smile.

A sigh went out, and Jackie said, “I know about the poison, Misty. Shauna told me.”

Misty’s eyes widened, shock coloring her expression. “Oh! Okay. That makes this easier.” She shrugged. “I can’t be the one to poison them.”

Was Misty getting cold feet? The thought made Shauna’s lips twist downward. She was the one who had proposed the insane plan in the first place.

“Why?” Jackie asked, head cocking to the side.

“Uh, well, last night I accidentally got too close to Mari during dinner, and everyone nearby told me to get away from her food.” Her feet shuffled, cheeks flushing.

Fuck. How could she forget that? How the hell could Misty forget that? No one was going to let Misty near them when they were eating.

She groaned, leaning back on her work table. Another thing she’d have to do, just fucking great.

Rubbing at her eyes, Shauna released a wet-sounding sigh. She lowered her hands and noticed liquid streaked across her palms. She must’ve pressed too hard. That’s the only reason why she was crying.

A couple more tears drifted down her cheeks. She tried to discreetly wipe them away, but she knew it was useless.

“I’ll do it,” Jackie said, jaw set.

“What?” Shauna snapped, straightening from her slouch.

Jackie's expression was blank and resolute. She nodded at an uncomfortable Misty.

"Tell me what I need to do," Jackie said, crossing her arms.

Shauna caught Jackie's arm in a tight grip, her face darkening as she glared. "You're not doing anything. Knock it off."

Jackie ignored her and instead raised a brow at Misty.

"Um, well, you—"

"Answer her, and I'll fucking gut you!" Shauna snarled, stepping toward Misty.

Pulling Shauna back, Jackie smiled guilelessly at Misty. "Can you give us some privacy, please? I'll come find you later."

Now trembling, Misty nodded and stumbled toward the door.

Shauna scowled at her back. "I mean it, Misty! Do no tell h—"

Jackie's hand slapped over her mouth, rolling her eyes. "Will you stop it?"

The door slammed behind Misty.

She ripped Jackie's palm away, then stepped into her space. "You are not fucking doing it."

A brow raised on Jackie's face. Her eyes roamed Shauna's expression.

Shauna's heart pounded as her teeth gritted, disgust rising at the thought of Jackie sullying herself like Shauna had.

Another tear slipped down her cheek.

Jackie tracked the drop with her gaze, her face softening, the edges of it cracking. She watched as it reached Shauna's chin, hanging there. A few moments passed in silence, and then a second tear joined it, pulling them both toward the floor.

Arms flew forward to engulf Shauna in a tight hug.

Shauna sunk into her warmth. The familiar feel of her soft body against hers partially calmed her, and her sweet scent did the rest. Nothing made her as okay as a Jackie hug.

She squeezed her tighter, and instead of complaining, like most would, Jackie only gripped her harder in return. She wished she could mold them together, so she'd always have pieces of Jackie inside her. Shauna still had Jackie's necklace around her neck, and the scars from her teeth on her throat, but it wasn't enough. Nothing would ever be enough.

She always wanted to take from Jackie—her comfort, her warmth, her breath. In return, Shauna would give up almost anything if it meant keeping her close. Maybe that's why she needed Jackie so near now. So she'd always have an endless supply of Jackie to sustain herself.

Jackie's eyes were soft as she kissed Shauna on the nose, but her tone was firm. "I'm doing it."

Shauna's teeth ground together, softer thoughts flying from her head as it felt as if Jackie was just jerking her around now. "Why can't you ever just fucking listen to me?" she

snapped.

Rolling her eyes, Jackie stepped back out of her arms, and Shauna ignored how much colder she felt without her. “I listen to you all the time, Shauna.”

Sure, Jackie listened to her when it was over stupid shit, but never when it was something important. It was so typical of her. Jackie always did whatever the hell she wanted, like Shauna’s opinion didn’t even matter.

And goddammit, this one mattered.

Jackie didn’t get to put this large of a burden on herself—not when it made Shauna have to deal with the sheer terror of thinking about Jackie hating herself a fraction as much as Shauna hated herself.

Shauna was trembling, old resentments simmering. Fury built inside her, the emotional whiplash of the last few minutes leaving her overfilled—the only way out now was the habitual, comforting anger she always looked to for guidance.

“When have you listened to me?” Shauna said with a furious glare aimed at Jackie.

Jackie scoffed, crossing her arms. “What do you want a list?”

“Yes,” Shauna spat. “List every time you listened to me. I’ll make my own, we’ll see whose is longer! Who actually busts their ass for the other person here.”

“Oh my god! Do you hear yourself? You sound ridiculous.” Jackie scoffed.

“So no list, huh? Figures. Can’t even do that much,” Shauna said, huffing with disgust.

“Are you fucking—” Jackie stopped, shaking her head, a few frustrated tears coming loose and running down her cheeks. “You are infuriating!”

“That’s fucking rich coming from you!”

“Do you not realize the only reason we’re even here arguing about this right now is because I listened to you last week when you said you had to do this?” Jackie snapped.

Shauna’s mouth slammed shut, her glare increasing in intensity as she tried to think of what to say. Dozens of insults rushed through her head. Names to hurl at Jackie. Accusations. Old scabs that she knew just the words to pick at. Anything that would make Jackie feel as bad as she did right now.

Triumph ran through her as she thought of something unimaginably cruel to say that Shauna knew would make Jackie leave with her tail between her legs.

Her mouth opened, but she hesitated, the words caught in her throat.

Thoughts of Jackie holding her, comforting her, loving her, ran through her mind.

Her love for Jackie bled through her anger, a seeping wound that could never heal.

Shauna physically bit her tongue, so hard she could taste iron—stopping herself from saying something she knew she could never take back.

She took a deep breath in. Held it. Closed her eyes. Told herself she needed to fucking *relax*. She opened her eyes, and the anger had disintegrated, gone as quickly as it came—as cruel and unusual as most of her emotions tended to be. Now she just felt tired and emotionally spent.

This was exhausting. They were going in circles, nothing getting resolved. If one of them didn't end this soon, they'd be there until Shauna made Jackie cry.

Sighing, Shauna told herself if she was the bigger person, then she was still the better person in the end, anyway.

Jackie's brows furrowed, her body tense, as if bracing for another verbal attack.

She ignored the look and pulled Jackie into her arms, knowing she'd never refuse a hug from Shauna. Jackie slumped immediately, a relieved breath going out by her ear as they clutched each other tight.

"I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry." Shauna whispered. The words tasted like acid as they passed her lips.

Jackie whimpered into her ear, holding Shauna tighter, practically melting into her.

The burning on her tongue eased with the gesture—pride slowly rebuilding as she remembered how deeply she could affect Jackie. Her hands rubbed Jackie's back, willing herself to be softer with the reminder. She let out a small, annoyed breath, knowing Jackie wouldn't let this go. But at least she'd calmed down. At least the urge to lash out had faded now that her mind was clear again.

"You can—" Shauna cut herself off, pausing to think.

She shook her head, a giggle slipping out.

Jackie pulled back, her eyes wet and confused.

"I just realized we're arguing about you being able to poison our soccer teammates," Shauna said, a slight grin tugging at her lips.

Jackie blinked, taking it in. Then she laughed and pulled Shauna back into the hug. "This is so stupid," Jackie sighed. "I'm just trying to help you, Shauna."

Nodding her head, Shauna let out a breath. She needed to believe Jackie would be okay. "Alright. I'll tell Misty you're doing it."

"And stop trying to scare people by telling them you're going to gut them." Jackie sighed.

Her lips turned down into a frown. "I'm not trying to scare people. I'm warning them I'm going to gut them if they don't do what I say."

"Oh my god," Jackie muttered, tone filled with exasperation.

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Two days later, Shauna tried not to make it obvious she was watching Jackie hold court with some of the other girls at dinner. Her eyes moved from Jackie to Melissa and Mari, then stopped on Gen and Robin.

Her teeth gritted. Was it too late to pick Jackie up and carry her away so she didn't have to do this?

Why did Jackie fight so hard for it? Was it just her need to always be involved in Shauna's business? A way to piss off Shauna? Some new form of sadism she'd developed out in the wilderness?

Jackie shifted closer to Gen, clutching her forearm—the one sitting right next to the watered down broth they all pretended was a meal.

The action made Shauna's fists clench, knowing it was too late now to stop this without making a big scene. She looked down, trying to hide the way her eyes filled with tears.

Shauna preferred to think the worst of Jackie, because if she found out that Jackie argued so fiercely to be the one to do this just because she saw how little Shauna wanted to, it would make her sick—overwhelmed with a mix of guilt and love.

After months here, she should be able to cope with things better. Could she live with herself if she knew it was her fault Jackie killed people just to protect Shauna's childish feelings?

Jackie stood, empty bowl in hand, stiffly making her way over after putting it away. There was a small shakiness in her limbs that was only noticeable when close. She made to sit down beside her, but Shauna's arms snaked out and pulled Jackie sideways onto her lap instead, needing her close and knowing Jackie needed it now, too.

A surprised breath released from Jackie's throat, looking at Shauna with a titled head, eyes shinier than normal. It was usually Jackie who chose to fall into an exasperated Shauna's lap.

Shauna reached up and tucked some of Jackie's hair behind her ear. She nodded, not sure if it was for reassurance or confirmation.

Biting her lip, Jackie nodded slowly in return, the glassiness in her eyes growing. She swallowed and then leaned forward, tucking her head onto Shauna's shoulder, a slight tremble in her body.

Her lips brushed against the skin of Shauna's throat as she murmured, "It's the only way," repeatedly, slumping into her hold.

A sigh escaped Shauna at the motion, her hand stroking up and down Jackie's back as she listened to the tense murmur in her ear and the relaxed chatter around them.

## 30. Shauna

The door to the room she shared with Jackie was shut tight in front of her. Beside her, Jackie fidgeted in Shauna's letterman jacket, clutching the lapels with both hands as she shifted on her feet.

With a sigh, Shauna turned away from her to the restless Yellowjackets nearby.

"Is Gen gonna be okay?" Melissa asked, twisting her hat around in her hands with wide eyes.

Jackie released a quiet hitched breath, knuckles whitening as her grip on the letterman tightened.

Shauna clenched her jaw. "I don't know."

"Did anyone see her and Robin collapse at like the same time?" Crystal asked, voice high and quick.

"Yeah," Natalie said, frowning from her place leaned against the wall. "Kinda weird, though, don't you think?" Her eyes drifted to Shauna, and she pretended not to feel them burning into the side of her face.

"Let's just wait to see what Misty says," Jackie said, staring down at her shoes.

Natalie grunted, but said nothing further.

Inching to the right, Shauna pressed the side of her body into Jackie's, hoping it would be a slight comfort for her. She'd prefer to just hold her, but she didn't want anyone else to realize how distressed Jackie was getting.

Jackie pressed back, a small breath loosening from her throat.

A few awkward minutes passed before the door opened, and Misty came out with a t-shirt covering the lower part of her face. Her eyes were wide and excited, and when she removed the fabric, there was a smile playing on her lips. Shauna glared at her, needing Misty not to act like this was a fucking amusement park, and her face smoothed out into something more serious.

Misty cleared her throat, and said, "Welp, it's not any kinda illness I know of." She hesitated. "Uh, but there was something else…"

Shauna's brow furrowed, not having any clue what else there could've been. "What?"

"Um, well, that symbol. You know *the* symbol. The Wilderness one." She raised her palm and pointed to it with her other hand. "Something scratched it into their skin here."

There was some shuffling and frightened murmuring from behind her, and Shauna blinked rapidly, trying to understand what the hell was going on.

She glanced at Jackie, but she looked just as dumbfounded. Then Shauna caught a proud gleam in Misty's eye—just a little too self-satisfied for her liking. Now she had a pretty good idea where those mysterious symbols came from.

Shauna reached for the knife she always kept tucked in its sheath before remembering she'd left it on the nightstand during dinner. She barely resisted groaning. Did Misty really have to add more theatrics to this? Had she scratched the symbol into their palms while they were unconscious, without even asking Shauna first? Sure, she guessed it looked more believably Wilderness related now, but god, Misty was so lame.

She closed her eyes, hoping to be granted some kind of patience, then turned to face everyone else.

Shauna crossed her arms and shook her head. "If it's really The Wilderness, then we need to leave it alone."

There was some uncomfortable shifting from the group. Melissa's face dropped into devastation.

Shauna swallowed, not able to look anymore when tears started filling her eyes. Was it wrong that she hoped luck went more in Gen's favor?

Natalie scoffed, stepping closer to Shauna. "Leave it alone? What the fuck does that mean?"

Shauna glanced at her and then turned to Misty. "Make sure they're comfortable. Tell me if anything happens."

Misty gave her a solemn nod, and it still seemed too dramatic, but it was better than before, so Shauna let her be.

"No one else go in there. Misty." She sighed, and had to force the rest of the words out, "Use the bed to sleep so you can stay close to them."

Misty's eyes widened, a smile stretching across her lips.

The others hadn't gotten to use a proper bed since they crashed. Jackie had suggested a few times taking turns—even her typical selfishness breaking at the sight of others coming from chores with sore bodies—but Shauna had stubbornly refused. She was in charge, cutting up the dead things, and hunting. Shauna was taking the damn bed, and she wasn't sleeping without Jackie. Shauna had to tell her the same thing every time she brought it up, and every time Jackie got into the bed after that, she'd have a cute pout Shauna ended up kissing away.

Misty was practically giddy as she turned back into the room and slammed the door behind her.

Shauna stood in place and glared holes into the wood.

The thought of Misty somehow leaving her scent on the sheets or tainting them with her presence had her gnashing her teeth.

Jackie's soft hand grabbed hers, breaking Shauna from her stare. A small smile played on her lips. "Stop being so possessive about everything."

“I wasn’t being possessive,” Shauna muttered. “I didn’t say anything.”

Jackie hummed and pulled her toward the attic. “You hate sharing.”

“So do you.” Shauna scowled, letting herself get tugged along without complaint.

Jackie glanced back, gaze fixed and intense. Her shoulders raised in a shrug. “Yeah, I do.”

Shauna examined her curiously as they continued on, wondering what that look meant.

“Hey.” Someone reached out and caught her arm, making her and Jackie stop just as they walked into the pantry.

She looked back to see it was Natalie, standing there with a dark expression on her face.

A sigh drifted from her throat, and she turned to Jackie, squeezing her hand. “Can you give us a minute?”

Jackie’s eyes darted between them with a frown. Her mouth opened, but then closed, before a sound came out. Pursing her lips, she finally nodded, and gave Shauna a kiss on the cheek before climbing up to the attic.

She turned back to Natalie, who was staring up thoughtfully at where Jackie went.

“What are you looking at?” Shauna snapped, stepping forward to make Natalie shift her focus.

“Relax, we’d kill each other in a day.” Natalie said, rolling her eyes. Shauna considered punching her anyway. “I was just wondering if she knew you’re the reason Gen and Robin are sick, or if you left her in the dark, too.” Natalie’s face twisted into a glare.

Shauna titled her head and stared directly into Natalie’s eyes. Then, with as much confidence as possible, she said, “I didn’t do anything to Gen and Robin.”

Natalie faltered. Her crossed arms fell to her side, mouth falling open.

Shauna knew she could lie. She could spin stories, talk around subjects, sometimes even bullshit someone. But to do it so assuredly, so directly? Yeah, that wasn’t typical for her, and Natalie knew it too.

So it was a good thing this wasn’t a lie at all. Shauna hadn’t done a thing to either of those girls.

Natalie studied her expression. Her eyes roamed Shauna’s face, growing more frustrated by the second as it stayed placid and unchanged.

With a sigh, Natalie shook her head. “You better not be lying to me, Shauna. I’m serious. Things have already been crazy enough out here.”

Her teeth gnawed on the inside of her cheek. “I’m not.”

Natalie slowly nodded. “Alright, I believe you. But then what the hell are we gonna do?”

Brow furrowing, Shauna cocked her head to the side. “What do you mean? I already told Misty to make them comfortable.”

“I mean, what if one of them fucking dies tonight, Shauna? Are we just supposed to move on like nothing happened?” Natalie hissed at her, stepping closer with a stormy glare.

Shauna frowned, looking away—unsure if Natalie was being obtuse on purpose, or if she really was that naively kindhearted. “If one of them dies, I think it’s pretty obvious what we do next.”

Natalie’s throat bounced as she swallowed, her expression falling. “Wasn’t once enough?”

“We’re starving out here.” Shauna crossed her arms, kicking at the dust under her feet. ‘We both know it.’ She hesitated, wondering how far down in hell she could go before her actions had her reaching the bottom. “I know you want to protect everyone, Nat. Help me do that. Please, I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.” Her hand reached out, squeezing Natalie’s shoulder.

Natalie’s expression softened, a gleam of pride in her eyes, and Shauna felt nausea swirling in her gut.

Swallowing, Natalie awkwardly brushed her hand off and looked away. “Alright, stop laying it on so thick,” she said, her voice hoarse. “I’m still with you.”

Shauna turned, nodding. She climbed up to the attic, and glanced down to see Natalie was staring into space, still lost in thought. “Go to sleep, Nat.”

Natalie broke away from her thoughts and nodded, leaving the pantry.

Shauna leaned her head forward onto her fist. She breathed in deep needing a moment before she was around anyone. Then she blew out, hoping that would expel some of her sin.

The feeling stayed, guilt living inside her like an icy crust stuck between the layers of her skin.

Her shoulders slumped. Why couldn’t it be that easy?

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It was Gen whose eyes ended up opening again the next day. Melissa ran inside as soon as Misty okayed it, and Shauna closed the door to give them some privacy and address everyone else.

She sighed, avoiding everyone’s eyes. “I need a few of you to help me move Robin to the front.”

“For what?” Laura Lee asked, gripping Lottie’s hand.

“What do you think?” Mari scoffed. “We’re all fucking starving here.”

Laura Lee’s eyes widened, glancing around the room. Most people avoided her gaze, already having come to the same conclusion as Mari.

A few moments passed as they all shuffled around, some mutters going out. Shauna avoided looking at the faces that had tears dripping down. A large breath went out.

Laura Lee had stepped closer to Lottie, leaning into her. “Okay, I understand.” Her voice was trembling, but still clear.

Shauna nodded and waited to see if anyone else would say anything. When no one did, she worked her jaw back and forth, wanting to just get this over with already. “Someone volunteer to help me, or I’m picking.”

Mari stepped forward, trying her best to look brave. Van came next, and then surprisingly, so did Tai. She caught Shauna’s eye and nodded.

Shauna nodded in return, some of the pressure easing at seeing Tai still had her back.

They went inside to grab Robin, solemn and silent, and as they walked through the rest of the cabin, everyone else turned to stare, like they didn’t want to forget where this came from.

The body was set down on her table out front. Van and Mari nodded to her and then quickly left, not wanting to linger, but Tai didn’t seem to agree.

“You alright?” Tai asked.

Shauna stood over Robin’s body, not preparing her yet. She wanted to wait for Tai to leave. To give Robin some type of privacy before she did anything else. She figured it was the least she could do considering Robin’s… recent bout of bad luck.

“I’m fine.” She stuck the tip of her knife into the wooden table, letting it wiggle around.

Taissa shuffled closer from her right. “Okay, just—” Tai sighed, cutting herself off. “Let me know if you ever wanna talk, okay?”

Shauna turned to her, a smirk on her lips. “I thought you wanted to be a lawyer, not a therapist.”

Tai rolled her eyes, pushing her on the shoulder. “Idiot.” Then she went back toward the cabin.

Turning her back to her, Shauna said, “Thanks, Tai.”

“Don’t mention it.” The door to the cabin slammed shut as she finally went in.

Shauna shook her head, a slight smile still on her face. Then she glanced down, realizing what she was doing.

Her grin slipped away. Shauna swallowed. Had she always been this person? The one to stand over a dead classmate’s body with a cheerful expression and a knife in hand. Or was it this place that made her this way?

She sighed and had to wonder if it even mattered. Either way, she’d still be there, holding the knife above Robin’s body, preparing it for dinner.

Shauna leaned down, and Jackie’s necklace hung from the angle. She grabbed it, pulling it higher into view. Eyeing it for a moment, she let her mind drift to thoughts of Jackie. Sometimes she wondered if Jackie was the only thing stopping her from losing her mind.

She brought the warm golden heart to her mouth, letting it linger there, imagining it was Jackie’s lips comforting her instead. For a moment, Shauna believed she could taste her.

Shauna’s stomach grumbled. Now wasn’t the time for that.

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Dinner was somber, as one would expect. Everyone was ravenous, so they devoured their food, but they were also like inmates on death row with the way they stared down at their meals.

Jackie leaned into her side, and Shauna watched her eat every bite. She still had a persisting fear that Jackie would starve herself, even though she knew at this point it was irrational with how much better Jackie had gotten about eating food procured this way.

After Jackie finished, she set her bowl aside, and moved in even closer. Shauna reached under the letterman Jackie had worn again to grab her waist, but then she paused as her hand brushed something. She blinked and leaned back to look at Jackie.

"One of my flannels too?" Shauna asked, her fingers dancing back and forth on the soft material Jackie was wearing.

The thought of Jackie wrapped in all things Shauna brought a proud grin to her lips, her hand tightening around Jackie's waist.

Jackie sighed, putting her face in Shauna's neck. "Shut up."

"I'd ask for something of yours, but I'm not wearing a sweater vest." Shauna whispered in her ear.

Jackie smacked her in the stomach. "You couldn't pull one off, anyway."

"So, is this just what we do now?" Gen asked, still weak, but at least back on her feet. "Eat our friend's bodies and then go cuddle and flirt with each other like nothing happened." She gestured to Jackie and Shauna.

Jackie flinched, trying to move away, but Shauna only held her closer. She would not let some obnoxious, half-dead junior tell her how to deal with things. If she wanted to forget her troubles in Jackie, then that's what Shauna was going to do.

The rest of the cabin stayed silent. The air swirled with awkwardness and something that bordered on depressing. Shauna's eyes flicked around. She felt like she was missing something.

Mari shifted, and Shauna's gaze snapped to her as she pulled her arms tighter around herself. That was when Shauna noticed how many others were doing the same. Gen, even with Melissa sitting beside her, still seemed so vacant—even her eyes looked empty.

*Oh.*

She wasn't just angry. She was jealous. Not of Jackie or Shauna, but of Jackie *and* Shauna. How their bond was so thick and opaque it could block out the world if they let it.

Shauna could wrap herself around Jackie and forget everything and everyone—just as she knew Jackie could do the same in return. And it was theirs, not something to be shared, not something she could even if she wanted to.

But it wasn't her problem none of them had their own Jackie to make it all better. It wasn't her problem they didn't have someone who made the air easier to breathe and the lights less dim on days they felt like dying.

The silence lengthened, the mood growing thick and uncomfortable. Shauna considered breaking the quiet, but instead, she pulled Jackie closer, sensing she was still upset because of Gen. She ran her fingers through Jackie's hair, savoring the way her breath hitched when Shauna scratched her nails over certain parts of her scalp. Her eyes flicked from Jackie's peaceful expression to the rest of the cabin, her glare daring anyone to comment again.

Everyone kept silent, avoiding her gaze.

The air grew even more stale and the faces sank deeper into misery as the minutes passed. Shauna's sour mood was surely making it worse, but it was mainly Gen's outburst that had caused the tension. It reminded everyone of what they were eating, as if speaking it aloud made it even harder to ignore.

Unfortunately, eating Robin might've filled their stomachs, but it had also given them just enough energy to hate themselves a little more.

Jackie leaned in, her voice low and warm in Shauna's ear. "You should say something."

"Like what?" she asked with a grimace.

Sighing, Jackie shook her head. "Something to help morale, Shipman." She lowered her voice to a mutter, "Before someone kills themselves."

Shauna reared back at that, not having even thought about it before. Her mind spun for a moment, trying to decide what to do. She hesitated to stand, still unsure. Ideas in her head moved in wilder and wilder directions. It was as her thoughts drifted on darker paths about using a suicide to their advantage if they ran out of food again, that Shauna decided it was best to stand and cut off that line of thought.

She glanced at Jackie, who gave her an encouraging nod.

Her mind went to the many speeches Jackie gave before games, the ones that would get them all fired up and ready. She bit her lip, realizing they were basically white noise to her. Shauna couldn't remember a thing Jackie used to say to them, even if it did always work somehow. Her tendency to tune them out was really biting her in the ass here.

She swallowed. "Um, The Wilderness chose," she said, avoiding everyone's gazes.

There was some uneasy shuffling. She knew she should say something else, but nothing would come to her. Shauna really was not the one for motivational speeches, especially ones being given because she was afraid people needed to be put on suicide watch.

A small sigh went out behind her, and Jackie stood up. Shauna turned to her with a tilted head. Jackie hadn't tried to be the center of attention in months.

Jackie took a deep breath and grasped Shauna's hand tightly. Shauna frowned as she felt a tremor move from Jackie's body into hers. She stroked Jackie's hand with her thumb, and the quivering eased, but it didn't completely fade.

"Listen up, Yellowjackets!" Shauna's brows raised to her hairline. Jackie was using her captain voice. The annoying one that Shauna had hated and also found extremely adorable, which always made her hate it more. "We need to live. I know it… it's hard right now, but that's what matters."

Jackie shook her head, a small smile on her lips. Her hand had stopped shaking. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I, for one, wanna live long enough to get the hell out of this place. I wanna eat ice cream again, take a hot shower.” Everyone made noises of agreement, and the mood lifted slightly. Frowns rose into sentimental smiles. Eyes brightened. Heads lifted. “Feel air conditioning again, see if Ross and Rachel end up together—”

A few people groaned in annoyance, cutting off what even Shauna could admit was a pretty good speech so far.

“Jackie, Ross sucks,” Van said, rolling her eyes.

A few people gasped, and Jackie stormed over to Van to argue with her, something that fed into the others in the room.

Shauna sat back down and watched in amusement as they all started debating nonsense. It was the liveliest they’d been in months.

She waited for a moment, for that familiar anger and resentment to come from Jackie basically stealing her thunder—but it never did. Her eyes tracked Jackie as she and Van started bickering, hands flying everywhere dramatically as they became more and more animated, and the only feeling that came to Shauna was an overwhelming amount of love.

Shauna would be glad to sit back and watch Jackie motivate the team if it meant she wouldn’t have to, and if it meant she got a front-row seat to a passionate Jackie. Maybe it was knowing that it was Shauna’s bed Jackie would be in later, her arms, her heart. Or maybe it was the fact Jackie had supported her as the one in charge multiple times now, helped her stay there without complaint.

Maybe Shauna was just in a good mood, and if this had happened in a week, she’d have gotten pissed and snapped at her.

Now, though, her gaze followed Jackie’s every move, not wanting to miss a thing, finding her own entertainment and contentment with the view.

Jackie noticed her staring and dashed over, pulling her back to Van and an exasperated Tai. She could only imagine how stupid the look on her face must be right now as she continued to gaze at Jackie with soft affection.

“Shipman! Are you even listening to me?” Jackie huffed.

“No,” Shauna said with a fond smile.

Jackie groaned, but leaned into her anyway. Shauna put one arm around Jackie’s shoulders, and Jackie put both arms around Shauna’s waist as she continued to debate with Van.

No one batted an eye at the fact Jackie had wrapped herself around Shauna like a vine—all of them used to it by now.

Shauna glanced around. The cabin was less gloomy than usual, the air not as charged with its usual amount of tension and fear as they all took a moment to let themselves have something resembling fun.

It could’ve been worse. She had Jackie. A roof over her head. Some friends. Maybe asking for anything else out there would’ve been playing with fate. Or The Wilderness. Or luck. Or

whatever the hell you wanted to call it.

Shauna supposed it didn't matter. They were all the same in the end. Good people like Javi died. Bad people like Shauna lived. There was no fairness in these woods.

But there was Shauna.

And if being a monster was what it took to ensure the girl who kept her sane survived, then she'd be one.